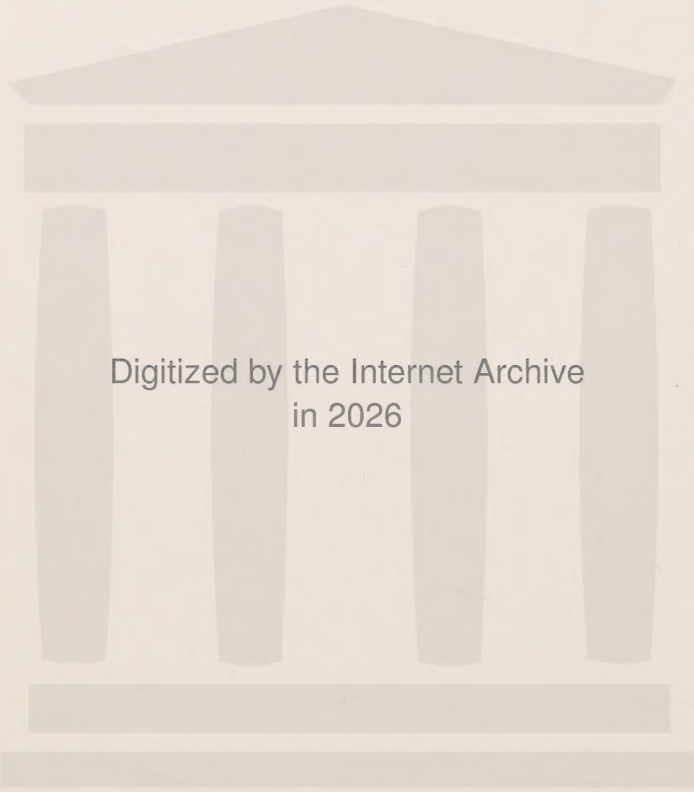


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POETRY & LIFE

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI
& HER POETRY

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Christina Weisselt

*For my friend and
sister, the late
Mrs. Weisselt, who died
in 1880, and was buried in the
Catholic cemetery at
St. Louis, Mo.*

CHRISTINA
ROSSETTI
& HER POETRY

BY

EDITH BIRKHEAD M.A.

Lecturer in English in the University
of Bristol

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GENERAL PREFACE

A GLANCE through the pages of this little book will suffice to disclose the general plan of the series of which it forms a part. Only a few words of explanation, therefore, will be necessary.

The point of departure is the undeniable fact that with the vast majority of young students of literature a living interest in the work of any poet can best be aroused, and an intelligent appreciation of it secured, when it is immediately associated with the character and career of the poet himself. The cases are indeed few and far between in which much fresh light will not be thrown upon a poem by some knowledge of the personality of the writer, while it will often be found that the most direct—perhaps even the only—way to the heart of its meaning lies through a consideration of the circumstances in which it had its birth. The purely æsthetic critic may possibly object that a poem should be regarded simply as a self-contained and detached piece of art, having no personal affiliations or bearings. Of the validity of this as an abstract principle nothing need now be said. The fact remains that, in the earlier stages of study at any rate, poetry is most valued and loved when it is made to seem most human and vital; and the human and vital interest of poetry can be most surely brought home

GENERAL PREFACE

to the reader by the biographical method of interpretation.

This is to some extent recognized by writers of histories and text-books of literature, and by editors of selections from the works of our poets; for place is always given by them to a certain amount of biographical material. But in the histories and text-books the biography of a given writer stands by itself, and his work has to be sought elsewhere, the student being left to make the connexion for himself; while even in our current editions of selections there is little systematic attempt to link biography, step by step, with production.

This brings us at once to the chief purpose of the present series. In this, biography and production will be considered together and in intimate association. In other words, an endeavour will be made to interest the reader in the lives and personalities of the poets dealt with, and at the same time to use biography as an introduction and key to their writings.

Each volume will therefore contain the life-story of the poet who forms its subject. In this, attention will be especially directed to his personality as it expressed itself in his poetry, and to the influences and conditions which counted most as formative factors in the growth of his genius. This biographical study will be used as a setting for a selection, as large as space will permit, of his representative poems. Such poems, where possible, will be reproduced in full.

GENERAL PREFACE

and care will be taken to bring out their connexion with his character, his circumstances, and the movement of his mind. Then, in addition, so much more general literary criticism will be incorporated as may seem to be needed to supplement the biographical material, and to exhibit both the essential qualities and the historical importance of his work.

It is believed that the plan thus pursued is substantially in the nature of a new departure, and that the volumes of this series, constituting as they will an introduction to the study of some of our greatest poets, will be found useful to teachers and students of literature, and no less to the general lover of English poetry.

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express here my indebtedness to Messrs Macmillan and Co., Ltd., the publishers of the complete edition of the poetical works of Christina Rossetti, and to the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge for their courtesy in allowing me to quote certain poems and prose extracts of which they hold the copyright. My thanks are also due to Messrs William Heinemann, Ltd., for permission to quote Swinburne's elegy on Christina Rossetti.

E. B.

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CHRISTINA ROSSETTI & HER POETRY

THE fame of Christina Rossetti has been overshadowed unduly by that of her brother, Dante Gabriel, one of the leaders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. His personality and tragic life-story make a direct appeal to the popular imagination. The sumptuous colouring of his pictures and the elaborate diction of his poetry both challenge attention; his very simplicity is intense and precious. In spite of its studied craftsmanship his work has an almost feverish vitality that can hardly fail to make an ineffaceable impression on the mind even of those who find it morbid or over-mannered. Dante Gabriel Rossetti is, in fact, a figure whom it is impossible to overlook in the history of nineteenth-century art. Christina Rossetti, on the other hand, is more obscure and withdrawn. She made no dramatic gestures. She did not even, like her sister, take a formal farewell of the world by entering a nunnery. To outward view she lived the sheltered life of a Victorian spinster given to piety and good works. Her published letters are those of a reticent woman who withheld even from intimate friends and relations the secrets of her personality. There is nothing in her record so arresting as Elizabeth Barrett's romantic

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love-story or Emily Brontë's grim encounter with loneliness and death. The Quaker-like simplicity of her life pervades her poetry. Her work, with the exception of "Goblin Market" and a few isolated lyrics, is generally subdued in tone and colouring. Her diction is natural and unstudied. Her verse rarely "surprises by a fine excess." She did not, like Dante Gabriel, ransack old romances in the British Museum in the search for "stunning words for poetry." Few of her phrases haunt the memory like the lines in her brother's sonnet:

The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,
The wind of death's imperishable wing.

Yet in its different way her artistry is as fine as his. Her effects are subtler and more elusive. The beauty of her lyrics lies rather in unity of composition than in separate felicities that detach themselves from the context. Although at the first glance Christina Rossetti, in her poetry and in her life, seems to have cultivated a "fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed," her strenuous pursuit of an ideal becomes evident on closer scrutiny. Beneath her quiet exterior the flame of life burnt ardently. Believing that "virtue is like precious odours, most fragrant when they are incensed and crushed," she refused resolutely to follow impulse. The artist's fierce desire for self-expression was tempered in her nature by a religious humility that demanded renunciation.

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Although in this way she narrowed deliberately the range of her verse, she did not destroy its intensity. The struggle between desire and denial inspired some of her finest poetry; but, since religion meant more to her than art, she did not winnow her harvest of verse so assiduously as her brother Dante Gabriel, who, severely æsthetic, subjected his poems to constant revision and refused to publish a line that did not satisfy his standards. Christina, though she spared no pains to make her devotional poems technically perfect, sometimes published undistinguished work, because she believed it might minister to the service of her faith. She thus came to be regarded as a writer of religious verse, which it would be a profanation to judge from an artistic point of view. William Michael Rossetti, who was responsible for the collected edition of her work, made it still more difficult to arrive at a final impression of her poetry by rescuing from the oblivion of her notebooks many of the verses which she herself withheld from publication. Some of them were obviously written in a tumult of emotion, when she was struggling unsuccessfully for expression. They were fragments of a painfully intimate journal, but they were not poetry. Only when she was calm enough to stand aloof from her experience while she re-created it did it assume the final and enduring form of art.

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II

TO understand the poetry of Christina Rossetti it is essential to study it in relation to her life, with which it is inseparably interwoven. A song like "When I am Dead, my Dearest," may be appreciated in the detachment of an anthology as the melodious expression of a human mood; "Uphill," with its quaint and homely imagery, embodies the familiar conception of life as a pilgrimage. But a knowledge of the writer's character and circumstances deepens the significance even of these simple lyrics. Although each has a unity of its own, it falls into its place in the view of life which she arrived at through the reaction of circumstances on an exceptionally sensitive temperament. Her lyrics form a spiritual biography.

The life of Christina Rossetti was outwardly quiet and uneventful. She was no eminent Victorian. She was hardly touched by the many problems which agitated her age. Living at a time when the conflict between science and religion left Matthew Arnold watching the sea of faith ebb from him, hearing only its "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar," she sang unclouded by the shadow of doubt. The argument of the Two Voices that disturbed the serenity of Tennyson's early days fell on the unheeding ears of one who was not concerned with man's place in the universe, but with her personal relations

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to God. An Anglican living in the days of the Oxford Movement, Christina Rossetti felt herself closer akin to Herbert, the seventeenth-century mystic, than to Keble or Newman. The industrial problems that preoccupied Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris, and are faithfully reflected in the poetry of Mrs Browning, left few traces on her work, although she took a personal interest in social questions. Except for one or two isolated poems, like "To-day for Me," on the Franco-Prussian War, there is little evidence that she was concerned with any of the great public events of her time. When an ardent feminist wrote to her on the subject of women's suffrage she quietly referred her correspondent to the Bible for her views on the responsibilities, duties, and privileges of her sex. In one of her sonnets she was not afraid to admonish in all good faith:

Let woman fear to teach and bear to learn,
Remembering the first woman's first mistake.
Eve had for pupil the inquiring snake,
Whose doubts she answered on a great concern.¹

Although she was closely associated with the poets and painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, she was little affected by their principles. Her direct simplicity of style, which they approved, was due to the candour of her nature rather than to theory. She was singularly independent of her brother's influence, although she valued his judgment of her verses.

¹ "Later Life," No. 15.

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A knowledge of the century in which Christina Rossetti lived is of slight assistance in the understanding of her poetry. She dwelt apart in a world of her own. Yet in the "shady crevice" in which, as she tells us, her life was spent she did not escape contact with love and death. It was these realities which awakened her to poetry.

III

CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI was born in London on December 5, 1830. She was the youngest child of Gabriele Rossetti, an Italian refugee, who, after taking part in the unsuccessful rising of the kingdom of Naples, fled to Malta, and finally settled in England. He was a man of letters, who had already published verse and won some reputation as a student of Dante. He soon became a teacher of Italian in King's College, London. His wife, half Italian and half English, was the daughter of Gaetano Polidori, who had been secretary to Alfieri, and the sister of Byron's friend and physician, Dr John Polidori. Christina Rossetti was thus three parts Italian. She could speak and write the language; she was Italian, too, in appearance, and, like all the Rossettis, possessed a voice with the distinct, musical intonation often characteristic of the race. She never lost the feeling of kinship with Italy, expressed in a poem, "En Route," written after a visit in June 1865:

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Farewell, land of love, Italy,
Sister-land of Paradise :
With mine own feet I have trodden thee,
Have seen with mine own eyes :
I remember, thou forgettest me,
I remember thee.

Blessed be the land that warms my heart,
And the kindly clime that cheers,
And the cordial faces clear from art,
And the tongue sweet in mine ears :
Take my heart, its truest tenderest part,
Dear land, take my tears.

Christina Rossetti belonged to an unusually gifted family. Dante Gabriel, the elder of her two brothers, won distinction in the arts of painting and of poetry. William Michael gained some reputation as a critic of art and literature. Her sister, Maria Francesca, who entered the Anglican sisterhood of All Saints in 1873, wrote a commentary on Dante. The two brothers attended King's College School, but Christina and her sister were educated at home mainly by their mother, who was a woman of exceptional intelligence. She refers often to the influence of her mother's character, " the pattern to me of everything that is simple, sweet, kindly, and noble." For fifty-six years they lived together in closest sympathy and affection, hardly parted for a day until her mother's death in 1886.

Christina Rossetti herself stated that if any one thing " schooled her in the direction of poetry " it was her visits in early childhood to the

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orchard and garden of her grandfather, Gaetano Polidori, who lived a stage-coach journey of thirty miles from London, at Holmer Green, in Buckinghamshire. These visits ceased when she was eight, and she was pent up in London till she was fourteen, when she experienced a memorable thrill of delight at the sight of primroses in a railway cutting. She cherished these memories wistfully, like one whose life had been scantily gifted with beauty. Except for eleven months in the country town of Frome, in Somerset, occasional holidays, and two foreign tours, she spent her life in the heart of London. Much of her poetry was written on the corner of her washstand in a bedroom whose only outlook was on the walls and chimney-pots of other houses. She confessed that her knowledge of what is called nature was that of the town sparrow, or at most that of the pigeon which makes an excursion occasionally from its home in Regent's Park or Kensington Gardens. Yet in her poetry there is no hint of the background of the city in which it was written. The intensity of her inner life apparently made what others call reality seem to her shadowy and remote. Oblivious to her actual surroundings, she could retreat at will into a world of memory and imagination.

It would be easy to imagine that when she sat down to compose her verses she often thought herself back in the sheltered garden remembered from childhood, looking over hedges to the orchard and meadows beyond and listening to the

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skylark singing over the cornfields. These are the scenes that her poetry often recalls. There is no smell of the upturned soil nor touch of "cool-rooted" flowers to suggest a close contact with earth. Yet some of the smaller things of nature she observed as minutely as a child. She delighted in the shapes and tints of the mosses when she visited the Morrisises at Kelmscott. She knew that the mole's fur had no right or wrong way, like the cat's, but could be stroked in either direction. She loved birds, squirrels, mice, glowworms, frogs, toads, and caterpillars. Her fearlessness in handling these creatures and her ability to distinguish one squirrel from another by the whisk of its tail were commented upon with surprise by a country-bred friend. She had evidently watched attentively the tiny living things that fascinate children, and remembered them again in her poem "To What Purpose is this Waste?":

And other eyes than ours
Were made to look on flowers,
Eyes of small birds and insects small:
The deep sun-blushing rose
Round which the prickles close
Opens her bosom to them all.
The tiniest living thing
That soars on feathered wing,
Or crawls among the long grass out of sight,
Has just as good a right
To its appointed portion of delight
As any King.

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This passion for animals was shared by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was her companion in many visits to the Zoo. It was here that she came to know the ratel who "tumbled hurry skurry," the lizard "with strange metallic mail," the wombat who "prowled obtuse and furry." The wistful stork and the camels who knelt as if in deprecation, moved by the lamentations of Eve, in another poem are clearly long-treasured memories of things seen in these early days. It is characteristic that after these excursions her brother entertained her with whimsical biographies of the animals, while Christina thought that the poor captives should be celebrated in "plaintive verses." She once had a vivid dream in which she saw all the caged canaries of London, like a wave of yellow light, sweep from the trees in Regent's Park, returning to captivity at dawn. Dante Gabriel thought of embodying the dream in a picture or poem, but the plan was not fulfilled. There is perhaps a recollection of this dream in one of the images of "Goblin Market," when Laura's yellow hair "streamed like a caged thing freed."

A pastime which Christina Rossetti shared with her brothers was the writing of sonnets. Each took the same set of rhymes and wrote sonnets in competition. This early practice in versifying probably helped to train her ear and ensure that command of metrical forms which places her in marked contrast with her contemporary, Mrs Browning. The least distinguished of her verses,

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even those written at the age of eleven for her mother's birthday, are at least technically correct, and many of her poems reveal an unusually subtle sense of sound.

Christina Rossetti's reading is said to have been less extensive than that of the rest of her family. The phrases of the Authorized Version and the Church Liturgy seem to have been so familiar that they became part of the texture of her mind. They are woven so freely into her poems that she can hardly have been conscious of quoting. She had begun to think in the terms of the Scriptures. But apart from this one dominating influence her reading left comparatively little trace on her work. At the age of nine she came across extracts from Keats's "Eve of St Agnes" in Hone's "Everyday Book." Metastasio was a great favourite between nine and fourteen. Like many another child, she knew "John Gilpin," "Casabianca," "Chevy Chase," "Robinson Crusoe," and "The Arabian Nights." Among the miscellaneous collection of books she is recorded to have read in early days were Carleton's "Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry," the tales of Maria Edgeworth, Pope's "Iliad," the plays of Shakespeare, and the novels of Scott. She enjoyed the novels of Dickens, but found those of Thackeray too "worldly." When she was about seventeen she came under the spell of the Tale of Terror. She and her brothers read Mrs Radcliffe; and the themes of two of her early poems were suggested

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by Maturin's "Melmoth the Wanderer," one of the most powerful supernatural stories ever written. She herself attempted a Tale of Terror, "Folio Q," a variant of the story of Peter Schlemihl and his shadow, but destroyed the manuscript on conscientious scruples. Toward the end of her life she undertook to write a biography of Mrs Radcliffe, for the "Eminent Women" series, but was obliged to relinquish the project for lack of material. The supernatural always held for her a certain charm. A few of her poems on eerie themes suggest reminiscences of old ballads like "Clerk Saunders," but they are plaintive and tenuous compared with that "terse, fierce masterpiece" she so much admired, her brother's "Sister Helen." At eighteen she began to study Dante. Probably his "Vita Nuova," with its glorification of spiritual love, appealed to her as profoundly as the "Divine Comedy."¹ It was the "Paradiso" rather than the "Purgatorio" and the "Inferno" which left traces on her work. The golden stair in "A Convent Threshold" is probably a memory of Dante's Seventh Heaven, and there is a reference to Dante's rose in one of her Italian poems, "The Reddening of the East" (No. 7). She read and re-read the dialogues of Plato with great zest, reassured, it may be surmised, by his idealism, which may indeed have played no small part in helping to determine her view of life.

¹ See "Century Magazine," 1884.

AND HER POETRY

Among the English poets whom she liked best were Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley. She knew some of Blake's lyrics, and one or two of her poems, "Little Lamb, who Lost Thee" and "Mother and Child," are derived from his "Songs of Innocence." For Blake's engraving of the soul and body reunited she had the deepest admiration, probably through Dante Gabriel's interest in Blake's designs. She was familiar with some of the religious poetry of the seventeenth century, including that of George Herbert. A poem called "Charity," written at fourteen, was, she confesses, suggested by his "Sweet Day, so Cool, so Calm, so Bright."

I praised the myrtle and the rose,
At sunrise in their beauty lying:
I passed them at the short day's close,
And both were dying.

It was inevitable that with her temperament and religion she should dislike Milton, part of whose theology was alien to her, and whose grandeur she probably found as oppressive as she found mountain scenery when she first reached Switzerland. She was interested in the verse of her contemporaries. In her early poems there are many echoes of Tennyson. The figure in that dreary poem "Repining" was obviously suggested by "Mariana in the Moated Grange" and "The Lady of Shalott."

She sat alway through the long day
Spinning the weary thread away;

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And ever said in undertone,
"Come, that I be no more alone."

Verses like "The Stream moaneth as it Floweth," with their blending of music and melancholy, are written in the mood of "Clari-bel" and "All Things will Die." Her ballads "Maggie a Lady," "Maude Clare," "Cousin Kate," and "Brandons Both" might have been inspired by "Lord Burleigh" or "Lady Clare." Tennyson's "Palace of Art," especially the soul's renunciation of her selfish enjoyment of her pleasure-house, clearly made a deep impression on Christina Rossetti, who saw in it a parallel to her own decision to renounce the joys of earth. In "From House to Home," written in the same metre as "The Palace of Art," she chooses a similar image:

Therefore in patience I possess my soul;
Yea, therefore as a flint I set my face,
To pluck down, to build up again the whole—
But in a distant place.

In "A Royal Princess," one of the few poems touching on social problems, she uses a metre reminiscent of "Locksley Hall." The manner of Robert Browning is caught with perhaps a hint of feminine coyness in "Winter, my Secret," a mere *tour de force* which she never repeated:

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:
Perhaps some day, who knows?

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But not to-day ; it froze, and blows, and snows,
And you're too curious : fie !

You want to hear it ? well :

Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell.

The influence of Mrs Browning was felt at one time by Dante Gabriel Rossetti to be a danger to his sister, and he warned her solemnly to be on her guard against affecting a " falsetto muscularity," but the advice was hardly necessary. Except for a few ballads, banal in sentiment, Christina Rossetti was almost as little inclined as Jane Austen to stray out of her natural orbit. Her imitations of her contemporaries were no more than feats of ingenuity. Most of her poems have the genuine ' lyric cry,' which, she declared, " I will back against all skilled labour." She wrote in April 1870 to Dante Gabriel :

It is impossible to go on singing out loud to one's one-stringed lyre. It is not in me, and therefore will never come out of me to turn to politics or philanthropy with Mrs Browning ; such many-sidedness I leave to one greater than I, and having said my say, may well sit silent.

Christina Rossetti's earliest verses, written before she completed her seventeenth year, and printed privately by her grandfather, show that her temperament was already deeply tinged with gloom, and her brother describes her as subject to fits of melancholy from an early age. About the age of fourteen her health was so delicate that she lived under the expectation of death, a fact that explains her tendency to brood over

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the peace of the grave. In "Resurrection Eve," written in April 1847, she seems already "half in love with easeful death":

He resteth: weep not;
The living sleep not
With so much calm.
He hears no chiding
And no deriding,
Hath joy for sorrow,
For night hath morrow,
For wounds hath balm,
For life's strange riot
Hath death and quiet.
Who would recall him
Of those that love him?
No fears appall him,
No ills befall him;
There's nought above him
Save turf and flowers
And pleasant grass.
Pass the swift hours,
How swiftly pass!

The frailty of life, with its fleeting joys, has already become the burden of her song:

Love is more sweet than flowers,
But sooner dying;
Warmer than sunny hours,
But faster flying.¹

The poems in 1847 seem to be coloured by some

¹ "Love Attacked."

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personal experience. In February "Love is the only everlasting duty"; in September,

Truly love's vain ; but oh how vainer still
Is that which is not love, but seems !
Concealed indifference, a covered ill,
A very dream of dreams.¹

But, like Tennyson in his youth, she is absorbed not only in her emotions, but in experimenting with lyrical measures. She makes several metrical ventures. Besides the common ballad measure and octosyllabic couplets, she handles the four-syllabled metre in "Resurrection Eve," and a three-foot trochaic measure in "Earth and Heaven"—

Water calmly flowing,
Sunlight deeply glowing,
Swans some river riding
That is gently gliding

—a measure combined with longer lines to express the sense of climbing in the verses of "The Martyr":

Higher, higher mounting,
The swift moments counting,—
Fear is left beneath her, and the chastening rod:
Tears no more shall blind her;
Trouble lies behind her;
Satisfied with hopeful rest, and replete with God.

Besides accomplishment in metre, her *juvenilia* show an unusual freedom from conventional

¹ "The Dream."

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diction. There are indications, too, of the love of colour which Christina Rossetti shared with the rest of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. "The Dead City," inspired by a story in "The Arabian Nights," anticipates "Goblin Market" in its catalogue of gorgeous and glowing fruits:

In green emerald baskets were
Sun-red apples, streaked and fair;
Here the nectarine and peach
And ripe plum lay, and on each
The bloom rested everywhere.

Grapes were hanging overhead,
Purple, pale, and ruby-red;
And in panniers all around
Yellow melons shone, fresh found,
With the dew upon them spread.

And the apricot and pear
And the pulpy fig were there,
Cherries and dark mulberries,
Bunchy currants, strawberries,
And the lemon wan and fair.

It was in the year following the printing of her early verses that Christina Rossetti's portrait was painted by her brother, probably as a preliminary study for the "Girlhood of Mary the Virgin." Her face, "with its extraordinary expression of pensive sweetness," was one of several models for the head of Christ in Holman Hunt's "Light of the World." She sat, among others, to her brother for the figure of the

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Virgin Mary in his Annunciation, "Ecce Ancilla Domini." The impression of her personality at the age of seventeen or eighteen may perhaps be derived more clearly from these portraits than from her early verses, which she herself felt to be affected, or from the harsh sketch she drew of her own character in the prose-story "Maude."

IV

IT was in September 1848 that Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Millais, and Holman Hunt, inspired by a book of engravings from the frescoes in the Campo Santo of Pisa, determined to effect a revolution in English art by returning to the aims and ideals of the early Italian painters, whose work was noble in subject, simple and sincere in treatment. They protested against the conventionality of contemporary art. The group of enthusiasts who called themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood decided to issue a periodical, called "The Germ," to propagate their principles. To this short-lived magazine Christina Rossetti contributed seven poems. Among them was the melodious song,

Oh roses for the flush of youth,
And laurel for the perfect prime;
But pluck an ivy branch for me
Grown old before my time.

Oh violets for the grave of youth,
And bay for those dead in their prime;

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Give me the withered leaves I chose
Before in the old time,

and the dirge for buried love, "An End":

Love, strong as Death, is dead.
Come, let us make his bed
Among the dying flowers:
A green turf at his head;
And a stone at his feet,
Whereon we may sit
In the quiet evening hours.

He was born in the spring,
And died before the harvesting:
On the last warm summer day
He left us; he would not stay
For autumn twilight cold and grey.
Sit we by his grave, and sing
He is gone away.

To few chords and sad and low
Sing we so:
Be our eyes fixed on the grass
Shadow-veiled as the years pass,
While we think of all that was
In the long ago.

This is an early and beautiful experiment in irregular verse in which the time grows slower as the chant deepens in solemnity, and dies away in reverie.

"Dream Land" has the hushed quietness of sound which often distinguishes the poetry of Christina Rossetti. It is one of the most

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perfect expressions of the longing for rest that
haunted her all through her sojourn on earth :

Where sunless rivers weep
Their waves into the deep,
She sleeps a charmed sleep :

Awake her not.
Led by a single star,
She came from very far
To seek where shadows are
Her pleasant lot.

She left the rosy morn,
She left the fields of corn,
For twilight cold and lorn
And water springs.
Through sleep, as through a veil,
She sees the sky look pale,
And hears the nightingale
That sadly sings.

Rest, rest, a perfect rest
Shed over brow and breast ;
Her face is toward the west,
The purple land.
She cannot see the grain
Ripening on hill and plain,
She cannot feel the rain
Upon her hand.

Rest, rest, for evermore
Upon a mossy shore ;
Rest, rest at the heart's core
Till time shall cease :

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Sleep that no pain shall wake;
Night that no morn shall break,
Till joy shall overtake
Her perfect peace.

Besides these poems in "The Germ," the other lyrics written in the years between 1847 and 1850 nearly all reveal her brooding serenely over the peace of the grave:

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet:
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on as if in pain;
And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.

For her melancholy she finds so soothing a rhythm that it sways her readers to her mood. It is as irresistible as the lulling stanzas of "The Lotos-eaters." The fact that Christina Rossetti chose these poems for publication and rejected others written at the same time, like

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"We buried her among the Flowers" and "Seeking Rest"—reminiscent of the lingering death of Tennyson's garrulous May Queen—shows that she already possessed an exacting artistic standard. The attempt to convey an emotion was not necessarily a poem, and she withheld several distastefully sentimental verses apparently because she recognized that they were effusions like those of the heroine of her prose-story "Maude," who "enriches her commonplace book with a heart-broken sonnet," yawns, leans back in her chair and wonders how she shall fill up the time to dinner—one of the rare vestiges of a sense of humour in the work of Christina Rossetti. Her age and her ill-health may well explain the faintly morbid taint in some of her early verses. Throughout most of her life, indeed, her outlook was overcast by illness. There was, as Dante Gabriel recognized, an unhealthy tendency to brooding in his own temperament as in that of his younger sister. Speaking of Maria Francesca, who had decided to enter a community, he writes in 1873 to his mother: "She will indeed be a great loss, being much the healthiest in mind and cheeriest of us all, except yourself. William comes next, and Christina and I are nowhere."

Her gloom was intensified by a personal experience which befell her soon after the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. It was among this group of friends that she met

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James Collinson, the artist, who fell in love with her when she was eighteen. Collinson was at that time a Roman Catholic and she was an Anglican. She decided that it would be impossible to marry anyone of a different faith. When he decided to rejoin the Anglican community they became formally engaged to one another. But Collinson, who seems to have been as conscience-ridden as Christina Rossetti, soon felt compelled to return to his former faith, and she renounced the idea of marrying him. How deeply the struggle affected her peace of mind is revealed in her poetry. She saw the conflict apparently as one between love and duty, or, in the language of the theologians, between nature and grace. Religion had already taken a strong hold on her mind. She was fearful lest she should love the creature more than the Creator. Probably she was already deeply imbued with the precepts of Thomas à Kempis, whose "Imitation of Christ" was one of her favourite books. Some of his sayings must have rung in her ears like a personal challenge: "Thou oughtest to leave thy beloved, for thy Beloved; for that Jesus will be loved alone above all things. . . . He that cleaveth unto creatures, shall fall with that which is subject to fall; he that embraceth Jesus shall stand firmly for ever." It was evidently under such influences as these that Christina, swayed by the lofty idealism of youth, decided to renounce earthly love, seeking comfort in the promise: "And

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the more thou withdrawest thyself from solace of creatures, so much the sweeter and more powerful consolations shalt thou find in Me. But at the first thou shalt not without some sadness, nor without a laborious conflict attain unto these consolations.”¹ The sadness and the laborious conflict are constantly recorded in her verse, the consolation more rarely. This renunciation was to her the logical result of her religious convictions. In her calmer moments she accepted it with resignation. But many of the poems found among the private papers betray the cost of the sacrifice she made.

These melancholy reveries on love unfulfilled recur often among the verses written in the years succeeding 1849, but gradually she seems to have recovered in some degree her health and spirits. In the four poems called “Three Stages” it is possible to trace the phases through which she passed. The first, “A Pause of Thought” (1848), shows her hesitation and reluctance to abandon love:

Alas thou foolish one! alike unfit
For healthy joy and salutary pain:
Thou knowest the chase useless, and again
Turnest to follow it.

The stanzas added in her notebook a year later (1849), but not meant for publication, record her renunciation of earthly love for heavenly love:

¹ Book iV, ch. xii.

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The fruitless thought of what I might have been,
Haunting me ever, will not let me rest.
A cold North wind has withered all my green,
My sun is in the West.

But, where my palace stood, with the same stone
I will uprear a shady hermitage:
And there my spirit shall keep house alone,
Accomplishing its age.

There other garden-beds shall lie around,
Full of sweet-briar and incense-bearing thyme:
There I will sit, and listen for the sound
Of the last lingering chime.

More than five years later she turned again
to this poem and added another ten stanzas.
In words that are reminiscent of Arnold's
"Resignation" she had decided:

So will I labour, but will not rejoice:
Will do and bear, but will not hope again:
Gone dead alike to pulses of quick pain
And pleasure's counterpoise.

But unawares a new hopefulness betrayed itself:

I said so in my heart: and so I thought
My life would lapse, a tedious monotone:
I thought to shut myself and dwell alone
Unseeking and unsought.

But first I tired, and then my care grew slack,
Till my heart dreamed, and maybe wandered
too:

I felt the sunshine glow again, and knew
The swallow on its track:

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All birds awoke to building in the leaves,
All buds awoke to fullness and sweet scent:
Ah too my heart woke unawares, intent
On fruitful harvest-sheaves.

It seems as if she refers here to her second experience of love. In 1847 she had first met Charles Bagot Cayley, a scholar and translator of some distinction. The acquaintance was renewed, according to William Michael Rossetti, in 1854, the year of these verses. He states, however, that they did not meet much until 1860. This does not preclude, however, the possibility of some crisis between the two having been reached some years earlier. The poems in the years 1857 and 1858 certainly reveal a poignancy of feeling that could hardly have been merely an anticipation of the pangs of renunciation.¹ Christina Rossetti was, as her brother admits, extremely reticent in affairs of the heart, and it is probable that he knew nothing of the emotional stress through which she passed before 1860, when she and Cayley began to see much of one another, and she made known to her brother their decision that marriage was out of the question. The only explanation William offers was that, though Cayley was broadly Christian, he was not an orthodox Churchman. It is difficult to accept this as a complete

¹ Miss Bald in her study of Christina Rossetti in her "Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century" accepts William Michael's dates, and on these grounds regards the poems as anticipations of what Christina thought she might feel if called upon once more to renounce a lover. This would imply a dramatic gift alien to her temperament.

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explanation. Passages in her prose writings seem to indicate that, though a devout Anglican, she was not narrowly sectarian in her outlook. In her poems she looks forward again and again to a union beyond the grave, clearly regarding her lover as a fellow-pilgrim to the Celestial City, as in "Memory" (February 17, 1865):

But often in my worn life's autumn weather
I watch there with clear eyes,
And think how it will be in Paradise
When we're together.

It is evident from her lyrical confessions that though she refused to marry him, she bitterly regretted later that he accepted her decision as final. In one of the Italian poems she speaks of one who said "No" meaning "Yes." Perhaps the most open avowal in her English verses is in the poem called "Another Spring" (September 1857):

If I might see another Spring,
I'd not plant summer flowers and wait:
I'd have my crocuses at once
My leafless pink mezerions,
My chill-veined snowdrops, choicer yet
My white or azure violet,
Leaf-nested primrose; anything
To blow at once, not late.

If I might see another Spring,
I'd listen to the daylight birds
That build their nests and pair and sing,

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Nor wait for mateless nightingale;
I'd listen to the lusty herds,
The ewes with lambs as white as snow,
I'd find out music in the hail
And all the winds that blow.

If I might see another Spring—
Oh stinging comment on my past
That all my past results in "if"—
If I might see another Spring
I'd laugh to-day, to-day is brief;
I would not wait for anything:
I'd use to-day that cannot last,
Be glad to-day and sing.

In "From Sunset to Star Rise" she admits:

For I have hedged me with a thorny hedge,
I live alone, I look to die alone.
Yet sometimes when a wind sighs through the
sedge
Ghosts of my buried years and friends come back,
My heart goes sighing after swallows flown
On sometime summer's unreturning track.

The difficulty probably lay not entirely in Christina Rossetti's religious convictions, but in something inherent in her temperament, a partly unconscious recoil from intimate contact with any human being lest it might violate a romantic ideal. In "Dream-love" she sees Love unawakened in an atmosphere of peace and beauty and fears to break the spell:

Young Love lies sleeping
In May-time of the year,

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Among the lilies,
Lapped in the tender light:
White lambs come grazing,
White doves come building there;
And round about him
The May-bushes are white.

Soft moss the pillow
For oh a softer cheek;
Broad leaves cast shadow
Upon the heavy eyes:
There winds and waters
Grow lulled and scarcely speak;
There twilight lingers
The longest in the skies.

Young Love lies dreaming;
But who shall tell the dream?
A perfect sunlight
On rustling forest tips;
Or perfect moonlight
Upon a rippling stream;
Or perfect silence,
Or song of cherished lips.

Burn odours round him
To fill the drowsy air;
Weave silent dances
Around him to and fro;
For oh in waking
The sights are not so fair,
And song and silence
Are not like these below.

Young Love lies dreaming
Till summer days are gone,—

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Dreaming and drowsing
Away to perfect sleep :
He sees the beauty
Sun hath not looked upon,
And tastes the fountain
Unutterably deep.

Him perfect music
Doth hush unto his rest,
And through the pauses
The perfect silence calms :
Oh poor the voices
Of earth from east to west,
And poor earth's stillness
Between her stately palms !

Young Love lies drowsing
Away to popped death :
Cool shadows deepen
Across the sleeping face :
So fails the summer
With warm delicious breath :
And what hath autumn
To give us in its place ?

Draw close the curtains
Of branched evergreen ;
Change cannot touch them
With fading fingers sere :
Here the first violets
Perhaps will bud unseen,
And a dove, maybe,
Return to nestle here.

But Love awakened she sees in another guise.

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In a day-dream, "Fata Morgana," written
down in April 1857,

A blue-eyed phantom far before
Is laughing, leaping toward the sun:
Like lead I chase it evermore,
I pant and run.

It breaks the sunlight bound on bound:
Goes singing as it leaps along
To sheep-bells with a dreamy sound
A dreamy song.

I laugh, it is so brisk and gay;
It is so far before, I weep:
I hope I shall lie down some day,
Lie down and sleep.

She fails in an impotent pursuit. The
phantom ever eluded her. She was in love with
love rather than with any human embodiment.
Hers is the mood of Shelley's "Epipsychidion,"
when he describes the being whom his spirit oft
met on its visioned wanderings:

In many mortal forms I rashly sought
The shadow of that idol of my thought.

She swiftly lost faith in earthly happiness.¹ She
could scarce "nerve herself to give what once
she gave, again." Her belief in the joy of love
faded. Love to her was but a mirage that had
vanished as she approached it:

¹ See "Amor Dormente?" December 1862.

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The hope I dreamed of was a dream,
Was but a dream; and now I wake,
Exceeding comfortless, and worn, and old,
For a dream's sake.

I hang my harp upon a tree,
A weeping willow in a lake;
I hang my silenced harp there, wrung and
snapt
For a dream's sake.

Lie still, lie still, my breaking heart;
My silent heart, lie still and break;
Life, and the world, and mine own self, are
changed
For a dream's sake.¹

There had always been in her nature a strong strain of idealism, which she fortified by her reading. Like Shelley, who in a previous existence had fallen in love with an Antigone, she could never find content in a mortal lover. It is significant that she read again and again with renewed enthusiasm the dialogues of Plato. Her mind must have found satisfaction in Socrates' idealism in the "Phædo":

The truth rather is that the soul which is pure at departing and draws after her no bodily taint, having never voluntarily during life had connection with the body, which she is ever avoiding, herself gathered into herself, and making such abstraction her perpetual study -- which means that she has been a true

¹ "Mirage," June 12, 1860.

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disciple of philosophy; and therefore has in fact been always engaged in the practice of dying—for is not philosophy the study of Death?—that soul, I say, herself invisible, departs to the invisible world—to the divine and immortal and rational: thither arriving, she is secure of bliss and is released from the error and folly of men, their fears and wild passions and all other human ills, and forever dwells, as they say of the initiated, in company with the gods.

In the figure of the winged horses and the charioteer in the "Phædrus" she must have seen an emblem of her own nature, in which flesh and spirit seemed at war.

That vehement poem "The Heart Knoweth its own Bitterness" (August 27, 1857) is not an indictment of any human lover, but of all human love. It is begotten of despair, the lust for the unattainable:

When all the over-work of life
Is finished once, and fast asleep
We swerve no more beneath the knife
But taste that silence cool and deep;
Forgetful of the highways rough,
Forgetful of the thorny scourge,
Forgetful of the tossing surge,
Then shall we find it is enough?

How can we say "enough" on earth—
"Enough" with such a craving heart?
I have not found it since my birth,
But still have bartered part for part.

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I have not held and hugged the whole,
But paid the old to gain the new:
Much have I paid, yet much is due,
Till I am beggared sense and soul.

I used to labour, used to strive
For pleasure with a restless will:
Now if I save my soul alive
All else what matters, good or ill?
I used to dream alone, to plan
Unspoken hopes and days to come:—
Of all my past this is the sum—
I will not lean on child of man.

To give, to give, not to receive!
I long to pour myself, my soul,
Not to keep back or count or leave,
But king with king to give the whole.
I long for one to stir my deep—
I have had enough of help and gift—
I long for one to search and sift
Myself, to take myself and keep.

You scratch my surface with your pin,
You stroke me smooth with hushing breath:—
Nay pierce, nay probe, nay dig within,
Probe my quick core and sound my depth.
You call me with a puny call,
You talk, you smile, you nothing do:
How should I spend my heart on you,
My heart that so outweighs you all?

Your vessels are by much too strait:
Were I to pour, you could not hold.—
Bear with me: I must bear to wait,
A fountain sealed through heat and cold.

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Bear with me days or months or years :
Deep must call deep until the end
When friend shall no more envy friend
Nor vex his friend at unawares.

Not in this world of hope deferred,
This world of perishable stuff :—
Eye hath not seen nor ear hath heard
Nor heart conceived that full “ enough ” :
Here moans the separating sea,
Here harvests fail, here breaks the heart :
There God shall join and no man part,
I full of Christ and Christ of me.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Browning conceive of love as one and indivisible,

Whose speech Truth knows not from her thought
Nor Love her body from her soul.

To Christina Rossetti, who shrank instinctively from the surrender of flesh and spirit, the highest form of love was an exalted spiritual state dissociated from the body. The conception is expressed in the poem “ By Way of Remembrance ” :

I love you and you know it—this at least,
This comfort is mine own in all my pain :
You know it, and can never doubt again,
And love’s mere self is a continual feast :
Not oath of mine nor blessing-word of priest
Could make my love more certain or more plain.

Her inviolable loyalty to this ideal is expressed with quiet intensity in a brief lyric :

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Shall I forget on this side of the grave?
I promise nothing: you must wait and see,
Patient and brave.
(O my soul, watch with him, and he with me.)

Shall I forget in peace of Paradise?
I promise nothing: follow, friend, and see,
Faithful and wise.
(O my soul, lead the way he walks with me.)

There is no superfluous word, no imagery, no figure of speech in these eight lines. The contrast between the restraint of this lyric and her brother's sensuous and decorative elaboration of a similar idea in the "Blessed Damosel" illustrates their difference in temperament. Her poetry tended to become as austere and bare as her life. If, as Pater affirmed, the highest art be the removal of all surplusage, this simple communication of a spiritual experience is perhaps the fine flower of her lyrics.

To the casual observer the life and character of Christina Rossetti may seem to possess unity and poise. Having chosen deliberately her way of life, she may appear to live in a tower of security, unassailed by doubts and fears. But a study of her poetry soon dispels the illusion of composure. It reveals a temperament full of contradictions and complexities that may well have proved as baffling to herself as to her lovers. She was deeply emotional, yet she was mercilessly critical of her own feelings. She dreaded loneliness, while she seemed to court it. Possessed

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of a strong vein of pride and independence, she longed always for the comfort of human companionship. Although she was capable of passionate devotion, she refused to let it find a natural outlet. Her soul was the battleground for unceasing conflicts. It is possible that the two different races represented in her ancestry may help to explain the lack of unity in her nature. The daughter of an exile, she was three parts Italian, but she may have inherited from her one English grandmother the strain of bleak austerity she associated with the cold North. Judging from her poetry, it seems as if she rarely knew peace within. The frequency with which she reiterates that she has made the right choice suggests that she had need to reassure herself. It is not those whose convictions are unshaken who murmur so often: "That which I chose, I choose." She could not escape from regret. After her renunciation it seemed to her that the very fountain of delight was dry. Like Coleridge in "Dejection," she saw but could not feel the beauty of nature:

These roses are as perfect as of old,
Those lilies wear their selfsame sunny white;
I, only I, am changed and sad and cold.
The morning star still glorifies the night,
And musical that fountain in its swell
Casts as of old its waters to the light.¹

The colour tended to fade out of her poetry as

¹ "Downcast," December 1856.

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it had faded out of her life. Once, when the spirit of delight visited her on a November day in 1857, the bright hues of the Pre-Raphaelite pictures flashed back into her joyous outburst of song:

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot:
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickset
fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;
Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.

But the escape of her spirit was momentary. Too often her "song-bird trails a broken wing." Only a few months later (April 1858) she laments, in "Autumn":

My trees are not in flower,
I have no bower,
And gusty creaks my tower,
And lonesome, very lonesome, is my strand.

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And on the day when she wrote "At Home"
(June 29, 1858), where she feels herself like a
ghost among the living,

I passed from the familiar room,
I who from love had passed away,
Like the remembrance of a guest
That tarrieth but a day,

she also wrote "Uphill," the lyric in whose
solemn questions and answers she seems to
accept once and for all the idea of life as a
pilgrimage to death:

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?
A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.
May not the darkness hide it from my face?
You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
Those who have gone before.
Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
Of labour you shall find the sum.
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
Yea, beds for all who come.

It was only ten days later that she wrote "The
Convent Threshold," that "very splendid piece

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of feminine ascetic passion " praised by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a song of penitence for love which, as Mrs Meynell realized, " praised love more fervently than would a chorus hymeneal." Through the lips of an imaginary nun leaving her lover for the convent's narrow room she utters her own struggle between earthly love and heavenly love, the creature and the Creator. The passionate outburst of feeling in this poem alone would prove the desperate truth of her cry in " Of Him that was Ready to Perish ":

O God Who before the beginning hast seen the end,
Who hast made me flesh and blood, not frost and
not fire,
Who hast filled me full of needs and love and
desire
And a heart that craves a friend.

THE CONVENT THRESHOLD

There's blood between us, love, my love,
There's father's blood, there's brother's blood;
And blood's a bar I cannot pass.
I choose the stairs that mount above,
Stair after golden sky-ward stair,
To city and to sea of glass.

My lily feet are soiled with mud,
With scarlet mud which tells a tale
Of hope that was, of guilt that was,
Of love that shall not yet avail;
Alas, my heart, if I could bare
My heart, this selfsame stain is there:

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I seek the sea of glass and fire
To wash the spot, to burn the snare;
Lo, stairs are meant to lift us higher:
Mount with me, mount the kindled stair.

Your eyes look earthward, mine look up.
I see the far-off city grand,
Beyond the hills a watered land,
Beyond the gulf a gleaming strand
Of mansions where the righteous sup;
Who sleep at ease among their trees,
Or wake to sing a cadenced hymn
With Cherubim and Seraphim.
They bore the Cross, they drained the cup,
Racked, roasted, crushed, wrenched limb from
limb,
They the offscouring of the world:
The heaven of starry heavens unfurled,
The sun before their face is dim.

You looking earthward, what see you?
Milk-white, wine-flushed among the vines,
Up and down leaping, to and fro,
Most glad, most full, made strong with wines,
Blooming as peaches pearled with dew,
Their golden windy hair afloat,
Love-music warbling in their throat,
Young men and women come and go.

You linger, yet the time is short:
Flee for your life, gird up your strength
To flee; the shadows stretched at length
Show that day wanes, that night draws nigh;
Flee to the mountain, tarry not.
Is this a time for smile and sigh,

AND HER POETRY

For songs among the secret trees
Where sudden blue birds nest and sport?
The time is short and yet you stay:
To-day, while it is called to-day,
Kneel, wrestle, knock, do violence, pray;
To-day is short, to-morrow nigh:
Why will you die? why will you die?

You sinned with me a pleasant sin:
Repent with me, for I repent.
Woe's me the lore I must unlearn!
Woe's me that easy way we went,
So rugged when I would return!
How long until my sleep begin,
How long shall stretch these nights and days?
Surely, clean Angels cry, she prays;
She laves her soul with tedious tears:
How long must stretch these years and years?

I turn from you my cheeks and eyes,
My hair which you shall see no more—
Alas for joy that went before,
For joy that dies, for love that dies!
Only my lips still turn to you,
My livid lips that cry, Repent!
O weary life, O weary Lent,
O weary time whose stars are few!

How should I rest in Paradise,
Or sit on steps of heaven alone?
If Saints and Angels spoke of love,
Should I not answer from my throne,
Have pity upon me, ye my friends,
For I have heard the sound thereof.
Should I not turn with yearning eyes,

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Turn earthwards with a pitiful pang?
Oh save me from a pang in heaven!
By all the gifts we took and gave,
Repent, repent, and be forgiven.
This life is long, but yet it ends;
Repent and purge your soul and save:
No gladder song the morning stars
Upon their birthday morning sang
Than Angels sing when one repents.

I tell you what I dreamed last night.
A spirit with transfigured face
Fire-footed clomb an infinite space.
I heard his hundred pinions clang,
Heaven-bells rejoicing rang and rang,
Heaven-air was thrilled with subtle scents,
Worlds spun upon their rushing cars:
He mounted shrieking "Give me light!"
Still light was poured on him, more light;
Angels, Archangels he outstripped,
Exultant in exceeding might,
And trod the skirts of Cherubim.
Still "Give me light," he shrieked; and dipped
His thirsty face, and drank a sea,
Athirst with thirst it could not slake.
I saw him, drunk with knowledge, take
From aching brows the aureole crown—
His locks writhe like a cloven snake—
He left his throne to grovel down
And lick the dust of Seraphs' feet:
For what is knowledge duly weighed?
Knowledge is strong, but love is sweet;
Yea all the progress he had made
Was but to learn that all is small
Save love, for love is all in all.

AND HER POETRY

I tell you what I dreamed last night.
It was not dark, it was not light,
Cold dews had drenched my plenteous hair
Through clay; you came to seek me there,
And "Do you dream of me?" you said.
My heart was dust that used to leap
To you; I answered half asleep:
"My pillow is damp, my sheets are red,
There's a leaden tester to my bed:
Find you a warmer playfellow,
A warmer pillow for your head,
A kinder love to love than mine."
You wrung your hands: while I, like lead,
Crushed downwards through the sodden earth:
You smote your hands but not in mirth,
And reeled but were not drunk with wine.

For all night long I dreamed of you:
I woke and prayed against my will,
Then slept to dream of you again.
At length I rose and knelt and prayed.
I cannot write the words I said,
My words were slow, my tears were few;
But through the dark my silence spoke
Like thunder. When this morning broke,
My face was pinched, my hair was grey,
And frozen blood was on the sill
Where stifling in my struggle I lay.

If now you saw me you would say:
Where is the face I used to love?
And I would answer: Gone before;
It tarries veiled in Paradise.
When once the morning star shall rise,
When earth with shadow flees away

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

And we stand safe within the door,
Then you shall lift the veil thereof.
Look up, rise up: for far above
Our palms are grown, our place is set;
There we shall meet as once we met,
And love with old familiar love.

In "Sleep at Sea" (1853) one of the most delicately wrought and ethereal of her poems, she seems to shadow forth in symbol her fear lest those who dream of earthly happiness may fail to hear the call of the spirit world:

Sound the deep waters:—
Who shall sound that deep?—
Too short the plummet,
And the watchmen sleep.
Some dream of effort
Up a toilsome steep;
Some dream of pasture grounds
For harmless sheep.

White shapes flit to and fro
From mast to mast;
They feel the distant tempest
That nears them fast:
Great rocks are straight ahead,
Great shoals not past;
They shout to one another
Upon the blast.

Oh soft the streams drop music
Between the hills,
And musical the birds' nests
Beside those rills:

AND HER POETRY

The nests are types of home
Love-hidden from ills,
The nests are types of spirits
Love-music fills.

So dream the sleepers,
Each man in his place;
The lightning shows the smile
Upon each face:
The ship is driving,—driving,—
It drives apace:
And sleepers smile, and spirits
Bewail their case.

The lightning glares and reddens
Across the skies;
It seems but sunset
To those sleeping eyes.
When did the sun go down
On such a wise?
From such a sunset
When shall day arise?

“Wake,” call the spirits:
But to heedless ears:
They have forgotten sorrows
And hopes and fears;
They have forgotten perils
And smiles and tears;
Their dream has held them long,
Long years and years.

“Wake,” call the spirits again:
But it would take
A louder summons
To bid them awake.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Some dream of pleasure
For another's sake:
Some dream, forgetful
Of a lifelong ache.

One by one slowly,
Ah how sad and slow!
Wailing and praying
The spirits rise and go:
Clear stainless spirits,
White, as white as snow;
Pale spirits, wailing
For an overthrow.

One by one flitting,
Like a mournful bird
Whose song is tired at last
For no mate heard.
The loving voice is silent,
The useless word;
One by one flitting
Sick with hope deferred.

Driving and driving,
The ship drives amain:
While swift from mast to mast
Shapes flit again,
Flit silent as the silence
Where men lie slain;
Their shadow cast upon the sails
Is like a stain.

No voice to call the sleepers,
No hand to raise:
They sleep to death in dreaming
Of length of days.

AND HER POETRY

Vanity of vanities,
The Preacher says :
Vanity is the end
Of all their ways.

In "A Ballad of Boding" she elaborates a similar idea. Instead of the hushed, dreamlike movement of the stanzas describing "Sleep at Sea" she uses a highly wrought metrical pattern not unlike that of Dryden's "Ode for St Cecilia's Day." The title is significant. She was haunted by fear and distrust of life. Intensely sensitive to the suffering which it can inflict, she tended to shrink from experience. She thought it better not to test love lest it should fail her. She dreaded disappointment. "Bitterness that may turn to sweetness is better than sweetness which may turn to bitterness." In "A Ballad of Boding" the three barges of manifold adorning are evidently symbolic of three ways of life. The first, with its sails of fire and its choir who breathe into flutes and finger soft guitars, is the love-ship, that ship on which Christina Rossetti herself feared after her first experience to embark. The second ship, whose emblem is the serpent, is chosen by the worldly wise who seek place and power and knowledge :

Wider-visioned, graver,
More distinct of purpose, more sustained of will.

The third ship has no allurements, no choir, no feast, no prizes. Those who board it toil and

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labour at the oar. But it alone, the ark of the Christian faith, whose purity and love are symbolized by the lily and the rose, resists the wiles of the devil, and, rescued by the Saviour, steers into the splendour of the sky. Hesitating in youth between love and religion, she refused after her first love-ship foundered to put forth again in a bark so fragile. She chose the barge with sackcloth for its sail.

V

NEARLY all the poems that Christina Rossetti had written up to 1858 had been concerned with her own emotions, and yet many of them reveal how ardently she longed for a refuge from herself, until she wished that she

Were nothing at all in all the world.
Not a body and not a soul:
Not so much as a grain of dust
Or drop of water from pole to pole.¹

The escape of the mystic into a state of ecstasy that implies the annihilation of self and ingression into the Divine Shadow was withheld from her. She never knew that " Handsome Anticipation of Heaven " described by Sir Thomas Browne. Another way of escape she seems to have denied herself. She might have fled, on

¹ " From the Antique."

AND HER POETRY

the viewless wings of poesy, into the land of fantasy. But only once, in "Goblin Market" (1859), does she allow herself to enter for more than a brief moment the enchanted country of which she was free. Here she lets her fancy roam, untrammelled by allegory or symbolism. "Goblin Market" is a revel of the senses; the swart-headed mulberries, bright-fire-like barberries, bloom-down-cheeked peaches, plump unpecked cherries, melons icy-cold, appeal to sight and touch and taste. Although the story itself, as it winds along, unfolds an ever-changing pageantry of strangeness and beauty, she adorns it with lovely imagery. Round the beauty of the golden-haired children lying in bed she twines a garland of similes:

Like two pigeons in one nest
Folded in each other's wings,

.

Like two blossoms on one stem,
Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow,
Like two wands of ivory
Tipped with gold for awful kings.

The grotesque goblins, with their antics and grimaces, are described in lines that hop and tumble, fly and run and leap. The poem has all the exact detail that children demand in a story that depends on the willing suspension of disbelief. It gives the impression that Christina Rossetti had dwelt in the land of Goblin Market. She knew that Dante Gabriel, who drew the

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

two illustrations and designed the binding, had not made the goblins evil and malicious enough.

Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry :
" Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy :
Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries ;—
All ripe together
In summer weather,—
Morns that pass by,
Fair eves that fly ;
Come buy, come buy :
Our grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegranates full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces,
Rare pears and greengages,
Damsons and bilberries,
Taste them and try :
Currants and gooseberries,
Bright-fire-like barberries,
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye ;
Come buy, come buy."

AND HER POETRY

Evening by evening
Among the brookside rushes,
Laura bowed her head to hear,
Lizzie veiled her blushes :
Crouching close together
In the cooling weather,
With clasping arms and cautioning lips,
With tingling cheeks and finger tips.
" Lie close," Laura said,
Pricking up her golden head :
" We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits :
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots ? "
" Come buy," call the goblins
Hobbling down the glen.
" Oh," cried Lizzie, " Laura, Laura,
You should not peep at goblin men."
Lizzie covered up her eyes,
Covered close lest they should look ;
Laura reared her glossy head,
And whispered like the restless brook :
" Look, Lizzie, look, Lizzie,
Down the glen tramp little men.
One hauls a basket,
One bears a plate,
One lugs a golden dish
Of many pounds' weight.
How fair the vine must grow
Whose grapes are so luscious ;
How warm the wind must blow
Through those fruit bushes."
" No," said Lizzie: " No, no, no ;
Their offers should not charm us,
Their evil gifts would harm us."

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

She thrust a dimpled finger
In each ear, shut eyes and ran :
Curious Laura chose to linger
Wondering at each merchant man.
One had a cat's face,
One whisked a tail,
One tramped at a rat's pace,
One crawled like a snail,
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and
furry,
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.
She heard a voice like voice of doves
Cooing all together :
They sounded kind and full of loves
In the pleasant weather.

Laura stretched her gleaming neck
Like a rush-imbedded swan,
Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch,
Like a vessel at the launch
When its last restraint is gone.

Backwards up the mossy glen
Turned and trooped the goblin men,
With their shrill repeated cry,
" Come buy, come buy."
When they reached where Laura was
They stood stock still upon the moss,
Leering at each other,
Brother with queer brother ;
Signalling each other,
Brother with sly brother.
One set his basket down,
One reared his plate ;

AND HER POETRY

One began to weave a crown
Of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown
(Men sell not such in any town);
One heaved the golden weight
Of dish and fruit to offer her:
"Come buy, come buy," was still their cry.
Laura stared but did not stir,
Longed but had no money.
The whisk-tailed merchant bade her taste
In tones as smooth as honey,
The cat-faced purr'd,
The rat-paced spoke a word
Of welcome, and the snail-paced even was
heard;
One parrot-voiced and jolly
Cried "Pretty Goblin" still for "Pretty
Polly";
One whistled like a bird.

But sweet-tooth Laura spoke in haste:
"Good folk, I have no coin;
To take were to purloin:
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather."
"You have much gold upon your head,"
They answered all together:
"Buy from us with a golden curl."
She clipped a precious golden lock,
She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,
Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red.
Sweeter than honey from the rock,
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Clearer than water flowed that juice;
She never tasted such before,
How should it cloy with length of use?
She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
She sucked until her lips were sore;
Then flung the emptied rinds away
But gathered up one kernel stone,
And knew not was it night or day
As she turned home alone.

Lizzie met her at the gate
Full of wise upbraidings:
" Dear, you should not stay so late,
Twilight is not good for maidens;
Should not loiter in the glen
In the haunts of goblin men.
Do you not remember Jeanie,
How she met them in the moonlight,
Took their gifts both choice and many,
Ate their fruits and wore their flowers
Plucked from bowers
Where summer ripens at all hours?
But ever in the noonlight
She pined and pined away;
Sought them by night and day,
Found them no more, but dwindled and grew
grey;
Then fell with the first snow,
While to this day no grass will grow
Where she lies low:
I planted daisies there a year ago
That never blow.
You should not loiter so."
" Nay, hush," said Laura:

AND HER POETRY

"Nay, hush, my sister :
I ate and ate my fill,
Yet my mouth waters still :
To-morrow night I will
Buy more " ; and kissed her.
" Have done with sorrow ;
I'll bring you plums to-morrow
Fresh on their mother twigs,
Cherries worth getting ;
You cannot think what figs
My teeth have met in,
What melons icy-cold
Piled on a dish of gold
Too huge for me to hold,
What peaches with a velvet nap,
Pellucid grapes without one seed :
Odorous indeed must be the mead
Whereon they grow, and pure the wave they
drink
With lilies at the brink,
And sugar-sweet their sap."

Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest,
Folded in each other's wings,
They lay down in their curtained bed :
Like two blossoms on one stem,
Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow,
Like two wands of ivory
Tipped with gold for awful kings.
Moon and stars gazed in at them,
Wind sang to them lullaby,
Lumbering owls forebore to fly,
Not a bat flapped to and fro
Round their nest :

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
Locked together in one nest.

Early in the morning
When the first cock crowed his warning,
Neat like bees, as sweet and busy,
Laura rose with Lizzie :
Fetched in honey, milked the cows,
Aired and set to rights the house,
Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,
Next churned butter, whipped up cream,
Fed their poultry, sat and sewed ;
Talked as modest maidens should :
Lizzie with an open heart,
Laura in an absent dream,
One content, one sick in part ;
One warbling for the mere bright day's
delight,
One longing for the night.

At length slow evening came :
They went with pitchers to the reedy brook ;
Lizzie most placid in her look,
Laura most like a leaping flame.
They drew the gurgling water from its deep.
Lizzie plucked purple and rich golden flags,
Then turning homeward said : " The sunset
flushes
Those furthest loftiest crags ;
Come, Laura, not another maiden lags.
No wilful squirrel wags,
The beasts and birds are fast asleep."
But Laura loitered still among the rushes,
And said the bank was steep.

AND HER POETRY

And said the hour was early still,
The dew not fall'n, the wind not chill;
Listening ever, but not catching
The customary cry,
"Come buy, come buy,"
With its iterated jingle
Of sugar-baited words:
Not for all her watching
Once discerning even one goblin
Racing, whisking, tumbling, hobbling—
Let alone the herds
That used to tramp along the glen,
In groups or single,
Of brisk fruit-merchant men.

Till Lizzie urged, "O Laura, come;
I hear the fruit-call, but I dare not look:
You should not loiter longer at this brook:
Come with me home.
The stars rise, the moon bends her arc,
Each glow-worm winks her spark,
Let us get home before the night grows dark:
For clouds may gather
Though this is summer weather,
Put out the lights and drench us through;
Then if we lost our way what should we do?"

Laura turned cold as stone
To find her sister heard that cry alone,
That goblin cry,
"Come buy our fruits, come buy."
Must she then buy no more such dainty fruit?
Must she no more such succous pasture find,
Gone deaf and blind?
Her tree of life drooped from the root:

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

She said not one word in her heart's sore
ache :
But peering thro' the dimness, nought discerning,
Trudged home, her pitcher dripping all the
way ;
So crept to bed, and lay
Silent till Lizzie slept ;
Then sat up in a passionate yearning,
And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and
wept
As if her heart would break.

Day after day, night after night,
Laura kept watch in vain
In sullen silence of exceeding pain.
She never caught again the goblin cry,
" Come buy, come buy " ;—
She never spied the goblin men
Hawking their fruits along the glen :
But when the noon waxed bright
Her hair grew thin and grey ;
She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
To swift decay and burn
Her fire away.

One day remembering her kernel-stone
She set it by a wall that faced the south ;
Dewed it with tears, hoped for a root,
Watched for a waxing shoot,
But there came none.
It never saw the sun,
It never felt the trickling moisture run :
While with sunk eyes and faded mouth
She dreamed of melons, as a traveller sees

AND HER POETRY

False waves in desert drouth
With shade of leaf-crowned trees,
And burns the thirstier in the sandful breeze.

She no more swept the house,
Tended the fowls or cows,
Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of wheat,
Brought water from the brook :
But sat listless in the chimney-nook
And would not eat.

Tender Lizzie could not bear
To watch her sister's cankerous care,
Yet not to share.
She night and morning
Caught the goblins' cry :
" Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy " :—
Beside the brook, along the glen,
She heard the tramp of goblin men,
The voice and stir
Poor Laura could not hear ;
Longed to buy fruit to comfort her,
But feared to pay too dear.
She thought of Jeanie in her grave,
Who should have been a bride ;
But who for joys brides hope to have
Fell sick and died
In her gay prime,
In earliest winter time,
With the first glazing rime,
With the first snow-fall of crisp winter time.

Till Laura dwindling
Seemed knocking at Death's door.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Then Lizzie weighed no more
Better and worse ;
But put a silver penny in her purse,
Kissed Laura, crossed the heath with clumps
 of furze
At twilight, halted by the brook :
And for the first time in her life
Began to listen and look.

Laughed every goblin
When they spied her peeping :
Came towards her hobbling,
Flying, running, leaping,
Puffing and blowing,
Chuckling, clapping, crowing,
Clucking and gobbling,
Mopping and mowing,
Full of airs and graces,
Pulling wry faces,
Demure grimaces,
Cat-like and rat-like,
Ratel- and wombat-like,
Snail-paced in a hurry,
Parrot-voiced and whistler,
Helter skelter, hurry skurry,
Chattering like magpies,
Fluttering like pigeons,
Gliding like fishes,—
Hugged her and kissed her :
Squeezed and caressed her :
Stretched up their dishes,
Panniers, and plates :
“ Look at our apples
Russet and dun,
Bob at our cherries,

AND HER POETRY

Bite at our peaches,
Citrons and dates,
Grapes for the asking,
Pears red with basking
Out in the sun,
Plums on their twigs;
Pluck them and suck them,—
Pomegranates, figs."

" Good folk," said Lizzie,
Mindful of Jeanie:
" Give me much and many ":
Held out her apron,
Tossed them her penny.
" Nay, take a seat with us,
Honour and eat with us,"
They answered grinning:
" Our feast is but beginning.
Night is yet early,
Warm and dew-pearly,
Wakeful and starry:
Such fruits as these
No man can carry;
Half their bloom would fly,
Half their dew would dry,
Half their flavour would pass by.
Sit down and feast with us,
Be welcome guest with us,
Cheer you and rest with us,"—
" Thank you," said Lizzie: " But one
waits
At home alone for me:
So without further parleying,
If you will not sell me any
Of your fruits though much and many,

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Give me back my silver penny
I tossed you for a fee."—
They began to scratch their pates,
No longer wagging, purring,
But visibly demurring,
Grunting and snarling.
One called her proud,
Cross-grained, uncivil;
Their tones waxed loud,
Their looks were evil.
Lashing their tails
They trod and hustled her,
Elbowed and jostled her,
Clawed with their nails,
Barking, mewling, hissing, mocking,
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,
Twitched her hair out by the roots,
Stamped upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat.

White and golden Lizzie stood,
Like a lily in a flood,—
Like a rock of blue-veined stone
Lashed by tides obstreperously,—
Like a beacon left alone
In a hoary roaring sea,
Sending up a golden fire,—
Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree,
White with blossoms honey-sweet,
Sore beset by wasp and bee,—
Like a royal virgin town
Topped with gilded dome and spire
Close beleaguered by a fleet
Mad to tug her standard down.

AND HER POETRY

One may lead a horse to water,
Twenty cannot make him drink.
Though the goblins cuffed and caught her,
Coaxed and fought her,
Bullied and besought her,
Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,
Kicked and knocked her,
Mauled and mocked her,
Lizzie uttered not a word;
Would not open lip from lip
Lest they should cram a mouthful in:
But laughed in heart to feel the drip
Of juice that syruded all her face,
And lodged in dimples of her chin,
And streaked her neck which quaked like
 curd.

At last the evil people,
Worn out by her resistance,
Flung back her penny, kicked their fruit
Along whichever road they took,
Not leaving root or stone or shoot;
Some writhed into the ground,
Some dived into the brook
With ring and ripple,
Some scudded on the gale without a sound,
Some vanished in the distance.

In a smart, ache, tingle,
Lizzie went her way;
Knew not was it night or day;
Sprang up the bank, tore thro' the furze,
Threaded copse and dingle,
And heard her penny jingle
Bouncing in her purse,—
Its bounce was music to her ear.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

She ran and ran
As if she feared some goblin man
Dogged her with gibe or curse
Or something worse :
But not one goblin skurried after,
Nor was she pricked by fear ;
The kind heart made her windy-paced
That urged her home quite out of breath with
haste
And inward laughter.

She cried, " Laura," up the garden,
" Did you miss me ?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me ;
Laura, make much of me ;
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men."

Laura started from her chair,
Flung her arms up in the air,
Clutched her hair :
" Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted
For my sake the fruit forbidden ?
Must your light like mine be hidden,
Your young life like mine be wasted,
Undone in mine undoing,
And ruined in my ruin,
Thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden ? "—
She clung about her sister,
Kissed and kissed and kissed her :

AND HER POETRY

Tears once again
Refreshed her shrunken eyes,
Dropping like rain
After long sultry drouth ;
Shaking with aguish fear, and pain,
She kissed and kissed her with a hungry
mouth.

Her lips began to scorch,
That juice was wormwood to her tongue,
She loathed the feast :
Writhing as one possessed she leaped and
sung,
Rent all her robe, and wrung
Her hands in lamentable haste,
And beat her breast.
Her locks streamed like the torch
Borne by a racer at full speed,
Or like the mane of horses in their flight,
Or like an eagle when she stems the light
Straight toward the sun,
Or like a caged thing freed,
Or like a flying flag when armies run.

Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked
at her heart,
Met the fire smouldering there
And overbore its lesser flame ;
She gorged on bitterness without a name :
Ah fool, to choose such part
Of soul-consuming care !
Sense failed in the mortal strife :
Like the watch-tower of a town
Which an earthquake shatters down,
Like a lightning-stricken mast,

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Like a wind-uprooted tree
Spun about,
Like a foam-topped waterspout
Cast down headlong in the sea,
She fell at last;
Pleasure past and anguish past,
Is it death or is it life?

Life out of death.
That night long Lizzie watched by her,
Counted her pulse's flagging stir,
Felt for her breath,
Held water to her lips, and cooled her face
With tears and fanning leaves.
But when the first birds chirped about their
eaves,
And early reapers plodded to the place
Of golden sheaves,
And dew-wet grass
Bowed in the morning winds so brisk to pass,
And new buds with new day
Opened of cup-like lilies on the stream,
Laura awoke as from a dream,
Laughed in the innocent old way,
Hugged Lizzie but not twice or thrice;
Her gleaming locks showed not one thread of
grey,
Her breath was sweet as May,
And light danced in her eyes.

Days, weeks, months, years
Afterwards, when both were wives
With children of their own;
Their mother-hearts beset with fears,
Their lives bound up in tender lives;

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Laura would call the little ones
And tell them of her early prime,
Those pleasant days long gone
Of not-returning time:
Would talk about the haunted glen,
The wicked quaint fruit-merchant men,
Their fruits like honey to the throat
But poison in the blood
(Men sell not such in any town):
Would tell them how her sister stood
In deadly peril to do her good,
And win the fiery antidote:
Then joining hands to little hands
Would bid them cling together,—
“ For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.”

As she grew older Christina Rossetti began to distrust the senses. Musing in her prose work “ The Face of the Deep ” (1892), she decided that hearing was the least sensual of the five senses.

Touch, taste, even smell, demand contact grosser or more subtle, as the case may be; sight, though eschewing contact, yet takes cognizance of what might be touched. Hearing is addressed by the intangible and the invisible.

That Christina Rossetti appreciated the external beauty of the senses “ Goblin Market ” alone would serve to show, but her later poetry seems to appeal chiefly to the ear. Even her visual

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imagery becomes vague and indefinite compared with the heightened sense-perceptions of this early fantasy.

In "The Prince's Progress" (1861 to 1865) Christina Rossetti had another opportunity of revisiting the land of romance. The poem hovers on the fringe of that country, without ever stepping over the border. It is marred by the light touch of sentimentality derived from Tennyson and ill-suited to Christina Rossetti's entirely serious temperament. The narrative is a mere *tour de force*, attempted at the suggestion of her brother. The song of the bride, to be seen no more save of Bridegroom Death, reveals the melancholy mood and cadence characteristic of her verse:

" Too late for love, too late for joy,
Too late, too late!
You loitered on the road too long,
You trifled at the gate:
The enchanted dove upon her branch
Died without a mate;
The enchanted princess in her tower
Slept, died, behind the grate;
Her heart was starving all this while
You made it wait.

" Ten years ago, five years ago,
One year ago,
Even then you had arrived in time,
Though somewhat slow;
Then you had known her living face
Which now you cannot know:

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The frozen fountain would have leaped,
The buds gone on to blow,
The warm south wind would have awaked
To melt the snow.

“ Is she fair now as she lies?
Once she was fair;
Meet queen for any kingly king,
With gold-dust on her hair.
Now these are poppies in her locks,
White poppies she must wear;
Must wear a veil to shroud her face
And the want graven there:
Or is the hunger fed at length,
Cast off the care?

“ We never saw her with a smile
Or with a frown;
Her bed seemed never soft to her,
Though tossed of down;
She little heeded what she wore,
Kirtle, or wreath, or gown;
We think her white brows often ached
Beneath her crown,
Till silvery hairs showed in her locks
That used to be so brown.

“ We never heard her speak in haste;
Her tones were sweet,
And modulated just so much
As it was meet:
Her heart sat silent through the noise
And concourse of the street.
There was no hurry in her hands,
No hurry in her feet;

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There was no bliss drew nigh to her,
That she might run to greet.

“ You should have wept her yesterday,
Wasting upon her bed :
But wherefore should you weep to-day
That she is dead ?
Lo we who love weep not to-day,
But crown her royal head.
Let be these poppies that we strew,
Your roses are too red :
Let be these poppies, not for you
Cut down and spread.”

The lines drift us back inevitably to Christina Rossetti herself. She seems to have lost the impulse to write objectively. She turns within into the world of her own feelings.

VI

HER view of life remained to the end profoundly melancholy. In spite of the consolation of her faith, she realized as bitterly as Hardy the pain of human existence. ‘ Yellham ’ would have told the same story to her as to him : “ Life offers—to deny.” That is the sting of many of Christina Rossetti’s poems. It is the secret behind the want graven on the face of the bride in “ The Prince’s Progress.” The gloom cast by her sense of life’s “ thwarted purposings ” is seen at its darkest in one of the sonnets in “ Later Life ” :

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Its very bud hangs cankered on the stalk,
Its very song-bird trails a broken wing,
Its very Spring is not indeed like Spring,
But sighs like Autumn round an aimless walk.
This Life we live is dead for all its breath;
Death's self it is, set off on pilgrimage,
Travelling with tottering steps the first short
stage:
The second stage is one mere desert dust
Where Death sits veiled amid creation's rust:—
Unveil thy face, O Death who art not Death.

Accepting this bleak conception of life, she set herself to endure hardness. The decision was made, but the conflict was not so easily resolved. A rebellious anger against life smoulders beneath the resignation she struggles to express. Again and again her baffled and thwarted instincts forced themselves to the surface. The battle was waged anew and was recorded in poignant verses like those of "An Old-World Thicket" (before 1882):

Each sore defeat of my defeated life
Faced and outfaced me in that bitter hour;
And turned to yearning palsy all my power,
And all my peace to strife,
Self stabbing self with keen lack-pity knife.

Sweetness of beauty moved me to despair,
Stung me to anger by its mere content,
Made me all lonely on that way I went,
Piled care upon my care,
Brimmed full my cup, and stripped me empty
and bare.

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But apparently the tumultuous and despairing moods tended to die down as the years passed. She was able, by pitiless self-discipline, to subdue herself into the personality described in a poem called "In Progress" (March 31, 1862):

Ten years ago it seemed impossible
That she should ever grow so calm as this,
With self-remembrance in her warmest kiss
And dim dried eyes like an exhausted well.
Slow-speaking when she has some fact to tell,
Silent with long-unbroken silences,
Centred in self yet not displeased to please,
Gravely monotonous like a passing bell.
Mindful of drudging daily common things,
Patient at pastime, patient at her work,
Wearied perhaps but strenuous certainly.
Sometimes I fancy we may one day see
Her head shoot forth seven stars from where
they lurk
And her eyes lightnings and her shoulders wings.

This is a sombre portrait of one who in that very year had published so gorgeous a riot of fancy as "Goblin Market," but the sketch is not incompatible with the impression which she made upon Edmund Gosse in 1870:

I think that a tasteful arrangement of dress might have made her appear a noble and even romantic figure as late as 1870, but, as I suppose, an ascetic or almost methodistical reserve caused her to clothe herself in a style, or with an absence of style, which was really distressing; her dark

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hair was streaked across her olive forehead, and turned up in a chignon, her high, stiff dress ended in a hard collar and plain brooch, the extraordinarily ordinary skirt sank over a belated crinoline, and these were inflictions hard to bear from the high-priestess of Pre-Raphaelitism. When it is added that her manner, from shyness, was of a portentous solemnity, that she had no small-talk whatever, and that the common topics of the day appeared to be entirely unknown to her, it will be understood that she was considered highly formidable by the young and flighty. I have seen her sitting alone, in the midst of a noisy drawing-room, like a pillar of cloud, a Sibyl whom no one had the audacity to approach.

Yet a kinder, or simpler soul, or one less concentrated on self, or of a humbler sweetness, never existed. And to an enthusiast who broke the bar of conventional chatter, and ventured on real subjects, her heart seemed to open like an unsealed fountain. The heavy lids of her weary-looking, bisted Italian eyes would lift and display her ardour as she talked of the mysteries of poetry and religion.¹

Christina Rossetti not only denied herself the fulfilment of love, but renounced many simple pleasures. According to Max Beerbohm's caricature, the dowdiness of her clothes, which distressed Gosse, drove her brother to remark: "What is the use, Christina, of having a heart like a singing-bird and a water-shoot and all the rest of it, if you insist on getting yourself up like a pew-opener?" But this refusal to indulge her sense of beauty was part of a deliberate policy

¹ "Critical Kit-Kats" Heinemann, 1896).

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of self-denial. She would not listen to Wagner's opera, "Parsival," not simply from mid-Victorian prejudice, but from a fear of its power to stir emotions she thought it better to repress. Her renunciation of the theatre and her naïve decision to give up chess because she was too fond of winning were part of a rigidly consistent asceticism. She prays in "Who Shall Deliver Me?":

God harden me against myself,
This coward with pathetic voice
Who craves for ease, and rest, and joys:

Myself, arch-traitor to myself;
My hollowest friend, my deadliest foe,
My clog whatever road I go.

In "Time Flies" she argues:

If we be "watery" characters we may not improbably need chills and shadows of life to harden us; full, unbroken, cloudless sunshine might evaporate us altogether, so that even if sought we should nowhere be found.

Or perhaps our lot will be cast in a narrow, galling groove. Yet better this, surely, than that we should dribble in all directions into mere slush and mire, come to worse than nothing ourselves, and swamp our neighbourhood.

She set herself the ideal:

Rule thyself: and already thou art king, freeman,
citizen of no mean city.

The spirit in which she made her sacrifices

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may be gleaned from such sayings as this from "Letter and Spirit," another devotional tract:

For the books we now forbear to read, we shall one day be endued with wisdom and knowledge; for the music we will not listen to, we shall join in the song of the redeemed. For the pictures from which we turn, we shall gaze unabashed on the Beatific Vision. For the companionship we shun, we shall be welcomed into angelic society and the communion of triumphant saints. For the amusements we avoid, we shall keep the Supreme jubilee. For the pleasures we miss, we shall abide and forever abide in the rapture of heaven.

And in the figurative prose of "The Face of the Deep" she pleads the ascetic ideal in language that betrays her unquenchable love of beauty:

O soul insatiable of glory, covet earnestly the best gifts, pursue them along the more excellent way. Barter not for Cleopatra's dissolving pearl the pearls which are the entrance-gates to New Jerusalem; for Dives's sumptuous daily fare the marriage-supper of Eternity; for bleak tents of Kedar, the curtains of Solomon; for Naboth to-day, David to-morrow; for what hath been told us, that whereof the half hath not been told us; for sight of eye, and hearing of ear, and heart's present desire, that which eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither entered into the heart of man.

Crouch lowest to spring highest. Disperse abroad and give to the poor, so shall thy riches make themselves wings and fly away as eagles towards heaven. Strip off thy ornaments now,

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that they may become chains about thy neck hereafter. To-night turn from the west in its fading purple, and set thy face steadfastly towards the east, where, out of darkness, golden glory and roses of a dawn that sets not will be revealed.

Since, as a Stranger and Pilgrim, the affairs of this world "did to her nothing appertain," she strove to set aside any pleasures that distracted her from her far-off goal. For her, earth was at best heaven's ante-chamber. Foothold on the earth she admits all must have, but she prays against roothold. By the very nature of her choice she could not be a completely developed human being. The partisans of Christina Rossetti, like those of Wordsworth, are sometimes at pains to prove that she possessed a sense of humour, as if to deny her one were to do her some dishonour. It is true that she is said to have been amused by a parody of her lyric "My Heart is like a Singing Bird" which began

My heart is like one asked to dine
Whose evening-dress is up the spout,

but the parody is so blatant that her appreciation of it hardly proves a sense of humour. When she attempts airy badinage, as in "No, thank you, John" and "The Buzzard," she lapses into pitiful folly. Again, she relaxes into playfulness in a letter to her brother, dwelling on the incongruous spectacle of herself as a fat poetess seated beside the grave of buried hope;

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but there is something a little forlorn in her jesting. It seems to arise not from a sudden exuberance of high spirits, like Dante Gabriel's freakish outbursts, but from a conscientious attempt to cultivate cheerfulness as one of the fundamental Christian virtues. Her brother's statement that she was repelled by Sir Toby Belch and that she had for Falstaff but a watery smile confirms this impression. There was no room for sack and sugar in Christina Rossetti's view of life. There was no inn for her until the end of the road. Laughter was one of the disturbing sounds of the earth that she had decided to relinquish. In the mystic world of one who, like Lazarus in Browning's poem, saw heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth the comic spirit had no place. She saw life as a pilgrimage, winding straight up the hill Difficulty. In her progress she would have been too solitary to fall into conversation, like Christian, with her fellow-pilgrims, too vigilant to sleep in the pleasant arbour, too strenuous to linger in the House Beautiful or take refuge in the place built by the lord of the hill for the relief and security of pilgrims and to awake and sing in the chamber called Peace.

She tended as she grew older to dedicate her art more and more to the service of her faith. She no longer revelled in colour and beauty for their own sake. The golden flash of angelic wings or the saints in their aureoles relieve the sober tones of some of her religious poems, but the

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bright hues in which she had once revelled gradually vanish out of her poetry. The flowers of the field once loved for their own sake become symbols of Christian virtues. Hope is like the harebell, trembling from its birth. The sun-courting heliotrope is remembered, not for its sweet scent and delicate colour, but as an emblem of the Christian soul turning instinctively heavenward. Even the mole, whose coat she had stroked tenderly in her youth, turns into a symbol of the earth-bound soul. The cloud reminds her of the clouds of witnesses that shall one day compass us about. Christians, she avers, should resemble the fireflies, not the glowworms, because their brightness should draw eyes upward, not down.

She is even fearful in "The Face of the Deep" lest symbolism should degenerate into an unwholesome pastime. Since the theme "vanity of vanities" is the burden of her song, her poetry is full of the frailest and most fleeting things of earth—the snowflakes, the rainbow, the falling rose, the showers and dewdrops, the paling stars, the brief trill of the bird's song. The evanescent beauties that we hardly realize before they pass are the images by which she illustrates the transitory nature of earthly things. In "Tempus Fugit" she is conscious that

Lovely Spring,
A brief sweet thing,
Is swift on the wing;
Gracious Summer,

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A slow sweet comer,
Hastens past;
Autumn while sweet,
Is all incomplete
With a moaning blast.
Nothing can last,
Can be cleaved unto,
Can be dwelt upon.
It is hurried through,
It is come and gone,
Undone it cannot be done;
It is ever to do,
Ever old, ever new,
Ever waxing old
And lapsing to Winter cold.

The times and seasons are a cycle of change and decay in "Death-watches":

The Spring spreads one green lap of flowers
Which Autumn buries at the fall,
No chilling showers of Autumn hours
Can stay them or recall;
Winds sing a dirge, while earth lays out of sight
Her garment of delight.

The cloven East brings forth the sun,
The cloven West doth bury him
What time his gorgeous race is run
And all the world grows dim;
A funeral moon is lit in heaven's hollow,
And pale the star-lights follow.

She is haunted by the theme of Herrick's
"Daffodils" in "Consider":

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Consider
The lilies of the field whose bloom is brief :
 We are as they ;
 Like them we fade away
As doth a leaf.

The winds of autumn wail and moan through
her verses with a cadence as melancholy as that
of Shelley's dirge :

There's no replying
To the Wind's sighing ;
Telling, foretelling,
Dying, undying,
Dwindling and swelling,
Complaining, droning,
Whistling and moaning,
Ever beginning,
Ending, repeating,
Hinting and dinning,
Lagging and fleeting ;—
We've no replying
Living or dying
To the Wind's sighing.

What are you telling,
Variable Wind-tone ?
What would be teaching,
O sinking, swelling,
Desolate Wind-moan ?
Ever for ever
Teaching and preaching,
Never, ah never
Making us wiser.

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The earliest riser
Catches no meaning,
The last who hearkens
Garners no gleaning
Of wisdom's treasure,
While the world darkens.
Living or dying,
In pain, in pleasure,
We've no replying
To wordless, flying
Wind's sighing.

For Christina Rossetti the meaning of this world of chance and change remained to the end as mysterious and unintelligible as the wind's sighing. She set her eyes on the life beyond.

As froth on the face of the deep,
As foam on the crest of the sea,
As dreams at the waking of sleep,
As gourd of a day and a night,
As harvest that no man shall reap,
As vintage that never shall be,
Is hope if it cling not aright,
O my God, unto Thee.¹

The last two lines, which alone would prevent the poem from being ascribed to the author of "Atalanta in Calydon," sound the keynote of Christina Rossetti's later verse.

Her devotional poems are less often songs of rejoicing than of hope.

¹ "The World—Self-destruction."

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A night was near, a day was near;
Between a day and night
I heard sweet voices calling clear,
Calling me:
I heard a whirr of wing on wing,
But could not see the sight;
I long to see the birds that sing,
I long to see.

Below the stars, beyond the moon,
Between the night and day,
I heard a rising, falling tune
Calling me:
I long to see the pipes and strings
Whereon such minstrels play;
I long to see each face that sings,
I long to see.

To-day or may be not to-day,
To-night or not to-night,
All voices that command or pray,
Calling me,
Shall kindle in my soul such fire
And in my eyes such light
That I shall see that heart's desire
I long to see.

Even Easter-tide rarely awakens in her heart
a song of triumph comparable to George Herbert's poem

I got me flowers to strew thy way,
I got me boughs off many a tree;
But thou wast up by break of day,
And broughtst thy sweets along with thee.

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She did not proclaim with Traherne, "Natural things are glorious, and to know them glorious," nor see, like him, heaven and earth full of the majesty of God's glory.

I hope indeed; but hope itself is fear
Viewed on the sunny side;
I hope, and disregard the world that's here,
The prizes drawn, the sweet things that betide;
I hope, and I abide.¹

In "De Profundis" she can hardly grasp at hope:

Oh why is heaven built so far,
Oh why is earth set so remote?
I cannot reach the nearest star
That hangs afloat.

I would not care to reach the moon,
One round monotonous of change;
Yet even she repeats her tune
Beyond my range.

I never watch the scattered fire
Of stars, or sun's far-trailing train,
But all my heart is one desire,
And all in vain:

For I am bound with fleshly bands,
Joy, beauty, lie beyond my scope;
I strain my heart, I stretch my hands,
And catch at hope.

¹ "Yet a Little While."

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She confesses, "Moreover, my Alleluias, when and wherefore come they? Few, cold, tearful, far between, more like the high octave of Alas than is seemly: too unlike the peaceful song of saints." There are indeed "more hearse-like airs than carols." Even for hope she chants a dirge: "Bury Hope out of Sight." "Despised and Rejected," a poem which recalls Holman Hunt's picture of the Light of the World at the door of the human soul, passes from pitiful pleading to a grimly haunting close:

So till the break of day:
Then died away
That voice, in silence as of sorrow;
Then footsteps echoing like a sigh
Passed me by,
Lingering footsteps slow to pass.
On the morrow
I saw upon the grass
Each footprint marked in blood, and on
my door
The mark of blood for evermore.

Others are as sad and plaintive in their humility as Cowper's "Olney Hymns." She too longs for a closer walk with God, and is tormented by doubts of her own worthiness; but in her serener moments she sings a "very humble, hopeful, quiet psalm."

Her carols have a sweetness and simplicity found in few writers except those of the Middle Ages. They fall almost as softly on the ear as the words of the old carol:

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I sing of a maiden
That is makeles,
King of all kings
To her son she ches,

He came all so still
Where his mother was,
As dew in April
That falleth on the grass.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

In the bleak mid-winter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter
Long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him
Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When He comes to reign;
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable-place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty
Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, whom cherubim
Worship night and day,
A breastful of milk
And a mangerful of hay;

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Enough for Him, whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim,
Thronged the air;
But only His mother
In her maiden bliss
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a Wise Man
I would do my part,—
Yet what I can I give Him,
Give my heart.

In another carol she writes in a more joyous strain:

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine;
Worship we our Jesus:
But wherewith for sacred sign?

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Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

As a writer of devotional verse Christina Rossetti is somewhat akin to George Herbert. As Walton records, "he had many conflicts with himself whether he should return to the painted pleasures of a Court life, or betake himself to a study of divinity and enter into sacred orders." His "Pilgrimage" describes a view of life similar to hers:

I travelled on, seeing the hill, where lay
My expectation.
A long it was and weary way.
The gloomy cave of Desperation
I left on th' one, and on the other side
The rock of Pride.

And so I came to Phansie's meadow strowed
With many a flower:
Fain would I here have made abode,
But I was quickened by my houre.
So to Care's cops I came, and there got through
With much ado.

That led me to the wilde of Passion, which
Some call the wold;
A wasted place, but sometimes rich.
Here I was robbed of all my gold,
Save one good angell, which a friend had ti'd
Close to my side.

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At length I got unto the gladsome hill,
Where lay my hope,
Where lay my heart; and climbing still,
When I had gained the brow and top,
A lake of brackish waters on the ground
Was all I found.

With that abashed and struck with many a sting
Of swarming fears,
I fell and cried, Alas my King,
Can both the way and end be tears?
Yet taking heart I rose, and then perceiv'd
I was deceived.

My hill was further; so I flung away,
Yet heard a crie,
Just as I went, None goes that way
And lives: "If that be all," said I,
"After so foul a journey death is fair,
And but a chair."

Christina Rossetti, like George Herbert, had steered her way between the cave of desperation and the rock of pride, she had been tempted by fancy's meadow, and wandered in

. . . the wilde of Passion, which
Some call the wold;

she had been struck with stings of swarming fears. In her search after God it was "weariness that tossed her to His breast." Her idea of rest is embodied in an image as quaint as Herbert's:

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
Of labour you shall find the sum.
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
Yea, beds for all who come.

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There is possibly, too, a memory of Herbert's "Pilgrimage" in another poem besides "Up-hill," in one of the series entitled "New Jerusalem and its Citizens":

Lord, by what inconceivable dim road
Thou leadest man on footsore pilgrimage!
Weariness is his rest from stage to stage,
Brief halting-places are his sole abode.
Onward he fares thro' rivers overflowed,
Thro' deserts where all doleful creatures rage;
Onward from year to year, from age to age,
He groans and totters onward with his load.
Behold how inconceivable his way;
How tenfold inconceivable the goal,
His goal of hope deferred, his promised peace:
Yea, but behold him sitting down at ease,
Refreshed in body and refreshed in soul,
At rest from labour on the Sabbath Day.

But Christina Rossetti never attained to Herbert's gentle serenity. The intimate note of Herbert's "Love Bade me Welcome" she never reaches in her dialogues between God and the soul. Her poetry often recalls that of the seventeenth-century devotional writers in its simple piety, as in the verses for "Ash Wednesday":

My God, my God, have mercy on my sin,
For it is great; and if I should begin
To tell it all, the day would be too small
To tell it in.

But she rarely ventures on their daring conceits, nor does she share their supreme moments of

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mystical illumination. She never beheld visions comparable to that in which Vaughan saw Eternity "like a great ring of pure and endless light." She never experienced the ecstatic ardours of Crashaw. She was denied even the sense of escape described in "The Prisoner" by Emily Brontë, who knew as well as she the "face of gloom and desolate despair":

But first a hush of peace—a soundless calm
descends,
The struggle of distress and fierce impatience
ends,
Mute music soothes my breast, unuttered har-
mony,
That I could never dream, till Earth was lost to
me.

Then dawns the Invisible, the Unseen its truth
reveals;
My outward sense is gone, my inward essence
feels,
Its wings are almost free—its home, its harbour
found,
Measuring the gulph it stoops, and dares the final
bound.

Oh, dreadful is the check—intense the agony—
When the ear begins to hear, and the eye begins
to see
When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think
again,
The soul to feel the flesh, and the flesh to feel
the chain.

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The rapture of escape Christina Rossetti never realized. Her spirit did not take the final bound. It remained on tiptoe for a flight. The soul's wings were almost free—"measuring the gulph it stoops"—but it never soared clear away from the earth it despised. She remained hovering like a lonely wraith on the confines of the two worlds and conscious of belonging to neither, knowing that she was herself her own prison.

The irresponsive silence of the land,
The irresponsive sounding of the sea,
Speak both one message of one sense to me:—
"Aloof, aloof, we stand aloof; so stand
Thou too aloof bound with the flawless band
Of inner solitude; we bind not thee;
But who from thy self-chain shall set thee free?"¹

It is the burden of loneliness that makes her long so continually for rest:

Life is not sweet. One day it will be sweet
To shut our eyes and die;
Nor feel the wild flowers blow, nor birds dart by
With flitting butterfly,
Nor grass grow long above our heads and feet,
Nor hear the happy lark that soars sky-high,
Nor sigh that spring is fleet and summer fleet,
Nor mark the waxing wheat,
Nor know who sits in our accustomed seat.²

The very words of her denial proved her still enamoured of the beauty that must die. Her

¹ "The Thread of Life." ² "Life and Death," April 24, 1863.

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lyrics rose often out of this unresting conflict. The flower of her poetry was not rooted and grounded in faith. It blossomed rather out of the common soil of human feeling. Besides the life of prayer and piety to which she vowed herself she continued to live a life of memories and sighs. It is from these filaments that some of her finest poetry is woven. When, like Mangan's "Nameless One," she fled for shelter to God He mated her soul with song.

VII

WHEN the burden of herself became intolerable Christina Rossetti found in the practice of her art a solace comparable to that which she experienced, in her religious life, in confession. The composition of such a poem as "Twice" must not only have given her the alleviation of expression, but have filled her with the conscious pleasure that comes through triumphant mastery of an artistic medium. The sorrow that the poem embodies is tempered by the harmony of language and the sense of difficulty overcome. The quiet concentration of a bitter and prolonged experience within the narrow compass of this simple lyric suggests that it was written in a mood both of intense feeling and of great calm. It seems to illustrate the truth of Wordsworth's statement that poetry takes its origin in "emotion recollected in tranquillity."

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I took my heart in my hand,
 (O my love, O my love),
I said: Let me fall or stand,
 Let me live or die,
But this once hear me speak—
 (O my love, O my love)—
Yet a woman's words are weak;
 You should speak, not I.

You took my heart in your hand
 With a friendly smile,
With a critical eye you scanned,
 Then set it down,
And said: It is still unripe,
 Better wait awhile;
Wait while the skylarks pipe,
 Till the corn grows brown.

As you set it down it broke—
 Broke, but I did not wince;
I smiled at the speech you spoke,
 At your judgment that I heard:
But I have not often smiled
 Since then, nor questioned since,
Nor cared for corn-flowers wild,
 Nor sung with the singing bird.

I take my heart in my hand,
 O my God, O my God,
My broken heart in my hand:
 Thou hast seen, judge Thou.
My hope was written on sand,
 O my God, O my God:
Now let Thy judgment stand—
 Yea, judge me now.

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This contemned of a man,
This marred one heedless day,
This heart take Thou to scan
Both within and without:
Refine with fire its gold,
Purge Thou its dross away—
Yea hold it in Thy hold,
Whence none can pluck it out.

I take my heart in my hand—
I shall not die, but live—
Before Thy face I stand;
I, for Thou callest such:
All that I have I bring,
All that I am I give;
Smile Thou and I shall sing,
But shall not question much.

When New Year met her somewhat sad,
and Old Year left her tired, she must have
found pleasure in ringing the knell of the old
year with melancholy solemnity in “Passing
Away”:

Passing away, saith the World, passing away:
Chances, beauty, and youth, sapped day by day:
Thy life never continueth in one stay.
Is the eye waxen dim, is the dark hair changing to
grey
That hath won neither laurel nor bay?
I shall clothe myself in Spring and bud in May:
Thou, root-stricken, shalt not rebuild thy decay
On my bosom for aye.
Then I answered: Yea.

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Passing away, saith my Soul, passing away :
With its burden of fear and hope, of labour and
play,
Hearken what the past doth witness and say :
Rust in thy gold, a moth is in thine array,
A canker is in thy bud, thy leaf must decay.
At midnight, at cockcrow, at morning, one certain
day
Lo, the Bridegroom shall come and shall not delay ;
Watch thou and pray.
Then I answered : Yea.

Passing away, saith my God, passing away :
Winter passeth after the long delay :
New grapes on the vine, new figs on the tender
spray,
Turtle calleth turtle in Heaven's May.
Though I tarry, wait for Me, trust Me, watch and
pray :
Arise, come away, night is past and lo it is day,
My love, My sister, My spouse, thou shalt hear Me
say.
Then I answered : Yea.

The mournful music of this poem, rising to a note of subdued exaltation, is a masterpiece of craftsmanship. The twenty-six lines are based on a single rhyming sound that lingers on the ear with a haunting and insistent melancholy ; but monotony is avoided by the deliberate irregularity of the rhythm and by the introduction of the shortened lines at the end of the stanzas. The composition is a highly organized work of art. In "Marvel of Marvels" she again

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carries through triumphantly another experiment in monorhyme. The long resonant lines suggest the solemn tolling of the passing bell, but the artifice is so unobtrusive that the impression it leaves is one of harmonious unity of sound and feeling :

Marvel of marvels, if I myself shall behold
With mine own eyes my King in His city of gold ;
Where the least of lambs is spotless white in the
fold,
Where the least and last of saints in spotless white
is stoled,
Where the dimmest head beyond a moon is
aureoled.
O saints, my beloved, now mouldering to mould in
the mould,
Shall I see you lift your heads, see your cerements
unrolled,
See with these very eyes ? who now in darkness
and cold
Tremble for the midnight cry, the rapture, the tale
untold,
“ The Bridegroom cometh, cometh, His Bride to
enfold.”

Cold it is, my beloved, since your funeral bell was
tollèd :
Cold it is, O my King, how cold alone on the
wold.

Compared with this impressive measure the tinnabulation of Poe's far-famed bells seems but a meretricious trick.

There is conscious artistry in the soaring speed

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and movement and flashing splendour of " Birds of Paradise " :

Golden-winged, silver-winged,
Winged with flashing flame,
Such a flight of birds I saw,
Birds without a name :
Singing songs in their own tongue—
Song of songs—they came.

One to another calling,
Each answering each,
One to another calling
In their proper speech :
High above my head they wheeled,
Far out of reach.

On wings of flame they went and came
With a cadenced clang :
Their silver wings tinkled,
Their golden wings rang ;
The wind it whistled through their wings
Where in heaven they sang.

They flashed and they darted
Awhile before mine eyes,
Mounting, mounting, mounting still,
In haste to scale the skies,
Birds without a nest on earth,
Birds of Paradise.

Where the moon riseth not
Nor sun seeks the west,
There to sing their glory
Which they sing at rest,
There to sing their love-song
When they sing their best :—

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Not in any garden
That mortal foot hath trod,
Not in any flowering tree
That springs from earthly sod,
But in the garden where they dwell,
The Paradise of God.

Christina Rossetti evidently delighted in imposing on herself difficult metrical tasks. She uses the Italian form of sonnet in her "Monna Innominata" series, and poises it with careful art. Occasionally she makes curious experiments in verse-pattern, reminiscent of the hour-glasses or altars of the metaphysical poets. Once, for instance, she writes in stanzas of five lines, gradually diminishing in length, a device which she may have imitated from Herbert's "Easter Wings," though Herbert makes a stanza of lines increasing in length to form the second wing of his pair:

Love still is Love, and doeth all things well,
Whether He show me heaven or hell,
Or earth in her decay
Passing away
On a day.

Love still is Love, tho' He should say "Depart,"
And break my incorrigible heart,
And set me out of sight,
Widowed of light
In the night.¹

¹ "Christ our All in All."

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Her verses often have a dying fall:

This land hath for music sobbing and sighing :
That land hath soft speech and sweet soft replying
Of all loves undying.¹

Her music rarely rises to a crescendo. It tends
rather to fade gently away:

Pardon the faults in me,
For the love of years ago:
Good-bye.
I must drift across the sea,
I must sink into the snow,
I must die.²

In "A Dirge" the lines gradually diminish in
length.

Why were you born when the snow was falling?
You should have come to the cuckoo's calling,
Or when grapes are green in the cluster,
Or at least when lithe swallows muster
For their far off flying
From summer dying.

She can handle the shortest measure without
allowing it to lapse into triviality:

CONFLUENTS

As rivers seek the sea,
Much more deep than they,
So my soul seeks thee
Far away;

¹ "This Near-at-hand Land."

² "Wife to Husband," June 8, 1861

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As running rivers moan
On their course alone,
So I moan
Left alone.

As the delicate rose
To the sun's sweet strength
Doth herself unclothe,
Breadth and length;
So spreads my heart to thee
Unveiled utterly,
I to thee
Utterly.

As morning dew exhales
Sunwards pure and free
So my spirit fails
After thee.
As dew leaves not a trace
On the green earth's face;
I, no trace
On thy face.

Its goal the river knows,
Dewdrops find a way,
Sunlight cheers the rose
In her day:
Shall I, lone sorrow past,
Find thee at the last?
Sorrow past,
Thee at last?

In "Moonshine" she shows the same lightness of touch in fashioning a frail web of words.

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Fair the sun riseth,
Bright as bright can be,
Fair the sun shineth
On a fair fair sea.

"Across the water
Wilt thou come with me,
Miles and long miles, love,
Over the salt sea?"

"If thou wilt hold me
Truly by the hand,
I will go with thee
Over sea and sand.

"If thou wilt hold me
That I shall not fall,
I will go with thee,
Love, in spite of all."

Fair the moon riseth
On her heavenly way,
Making the waters
Fairer than by day.

A little vessel
Rocks upon the sea,
Where stands a maiden
Fair as fair can be.

Her smile rejoices
Though her mouth is mute:
She treads the vessel
With her little foot.

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Truly he holds her
Faithful to his pledge,
Guiding the vessel
From the water's edge.

Fair the moon saileth
With her pale fair light,
Fair the girl gazeth
Out into the night.

Saith she, " Like silver
Shines thy hair, not gold " :
Saith she, " I shiver
In thy steady hold.

" Love," she saith weeping,
" Loose thy hold awhile ;
My heart is freezing
In thy freezing smile."

The moon is hidden
By a silver cloud,
Fair as a halo
Or a maiden's shroud.

No more beseeching,
Ever on they go :
The vessel rocketh
Softly to and fro :

And still he holds her
That she shall not fall,
Till pale mists whiten
Dimly over all.

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Onward and onward,
Far across the sea :
Onward and onward,
Pale as pale can be :

Onward and onward,
Ever hand in hand,
From sun and moonlight
To another land.

Sometimes a word or phrase echoes through her poems and hovers in the air like a haunting melody :

Heaven is not far, tho' far the sky
Overarching earth and main.
It takes not long to live and die,
Die, revive, and rise again.
Not long : how long ? Oh long re-echoing
song !
O Lord, how long ?

In her later years, perhaps, it may be surmised, after Swinburne had published his "Century of Roundels," in 1883, the roundel became one of her favourite forms. The refrain, thrice repeated in this circlet of song, was a metrical device that appealed to her, but many of her poems in this metre tend to become artificial, as in :

Love said nay, while Hope kept saying
All his sweetest say,
Hope so keen to start a-maying ! —
Love said nay !

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Love was bent to watch and pray;
Long the watching, long the praying;
Hope grew drowsy, pale and grey.

Hope in dreams set off a-straying,
All his dream-world flushed by May;
While unslumbering, praying, weighing,
Love said nay.

Or :

My love whose heart is tender said to me,
"A moon lacks light except her sun befriend
her.
Let us keep tryst in heaven, dear Friend," said
she,
My love whose heart is tender.

From such a loftiness no words could bend her :
Yet still she spoke of "us" and spoke as "we,"
Her hope substantial, while my hope grew
slender.

Now keeps she tryst beyond earth's utmost sea,
Wholly at rest, tho' storms should toss and rend
her;
And still she keeps my heart and keeps its key,
My love whose heart is tender.

It is probably owing to Christina Rossetti's delicate artistry in the technique of verse that she has among her admirers two poets, Swinburne and Mr Walter de la Mare,¹ who, so different in other respects, have in common with her a sensitive perception of the beauty of sound.

¹ Mr de la Mare's note on "Dream-love" in "Come Hither" is almost as exquisite as the poem itself.

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She was by no means a conventional metrist. Trusting her own sense of harmony, she is not afraid to vary her rhythms subtly according to the theme. Though her verses often defy the ordinary rules of scansion, they rarely fail to satisfy the ear. Possessed of an unusually beautiful voice and a fine sense of sound, she took a conscious pleasure in the melody of verse and of prose. Her knowledge of Italian, "the tongue sweet in her ears," no doubt quickened her appreciation of the music of words. She is said by Mackenzie Bell to have read aloud such poems as her own "Where Shall I Find a White Rose Blowing?" and Southwell's "Burning Babe" with extraordinary charm.

It was probably the ability to transmute her darker moods into poetry that helped Christina Rossetti to maintain the outward serenity which seems to have impressed her contemporaries, and is reflected in her own letters. It is possible that if Cowper had sought expression more often, as he did in "The Castaway," for his agony and despair he might have achieved a greater measure of sanity and happiness. But he shrank from exposing the skeletons in his closet. His whole life was a gallant struggle to escape from the malady of his spirit. Poetry to him was merely a diversion, like growing cucumbers or playing with his hares. It was only at rare intervals that he turned aside from his "Task" or from the fashioning of elegant trifles to express himself. The receipt of his mother's picture, the

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illness of Mary Unwin, drew from him lyrics charged with feeling, but he did not turn naturally to poetry as a safe channel for morbid moods and emotions. It was his instinct rather to evade himself. He did not realize, as Christina Rossetti did, the relief of confession. She turned to poetry as an outlet for feelings that poisoned her peace of mind. As she wrote, grief and pain became mysteriously transfigured. Denying herself many of the joys of existence, she knew at least the supreme joy of creation.

VIII

BESIDES her two encounters with love there are few external incidents to record in the life of Christina Rossetti. The fortunes of the family were at a low ebb from 1842 to 1854. Gabriele Rossetti, whose health and eyesight were failing, was obliged to relinquish his work. His wife, to eke out their narrow resources, first went out teaching, and then, in 1851, opened a day-school, in which Christina assisted her. In 1853 they moved to Frome, in Somerset, in the hope that there was an opening for a school, but the project failed, and in the following year they were back in London. After her father's death in 1854 Christina was anxious to join her aunt, Eliza Polidori, who was going out as a nurse to Scutari, under Florence Nightingale's scheme, but she found she was under the stipulated age,

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and had to give up the idea. She settled down at home, and the rest of her life was devoted to the service of her family, especially of her mother, "whose service is my special dignity," and to social work and religious duties. In 1861 she went abroad for the first time, visiting various French towns. In 1862 Dante Gabriel's wife died. In 1865 Christina travelled to Italy, and on her return wrote the verses already quoted (p. 19) and the tribute "Italia, io ti Saluto":

To come back from the sweet South, to the North
Where I was born, bred, look to die;
Come back to do my day's work in its day,
Play out my play—
Amen, amen, say I.

To see no more the country half my own,
Nor hear the half familiar speech,
Amen, I say; I turn to that bleak North
Whence I came forth—
The South lies out of reach.

But when our swallows fly back to the South,
To the sweet South, to the sweet South,
The tears may come again into my eyes
On the old wise,
And the sweet name to my mouth.

In 1873 her sister Maria Francesca joined the Anglican community of All Saints. The following year her brother William Michael, with whom she and her mother lived, married Lucy Madox Brown. They continued to share his

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house for a time, but moved to another in 1876. In November of that year Maria Francesca died, and six years later Dante Gabriel, who was nursed through his last illness by Christina and her mother, was buried in Birchington Churchyard:

A lowly hill which overlooks a flat,
Half sea, half country side;
A flat-shored sea of low-voiced creeping tide
Over a chalky weedy mat.

A hill of hillocks, flowery and kept green
Round Crosses raised for hope,
With many-tinted sunsets where the slope
Faces the lingering western sheen.

A lowly hope, a height that is but low,
While Time sets solemnly,
While the tide rises of Eternity,
Silent and neither swift nor slow.¹

The following year came the death of Cayley, and soon after she wrote the lines "Who Shall Say?" with their memory of those written nearly twenty years earlier, "Shall I Forget?" using still her favourite device of the question:

I toiled on, but thou
Wast weary of the way,
And so we parted: now
Who shall say
Which is happier—I or thou?

¹ "Birchington Churchyard," April 1882.

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I am weary now
On the solitary way:
But art thou rested, thou?
Who shall say
Which of us is calmer now?

Still my heart's love, thou,
In thy secret way,
Art still remembered now;
Who shall say
Still rememberest thou?

In the spring of 1885 she wrote the beautiful
elegy "One Seaside Grave":

Unmindful of the roses,
Unmindful of the thorn,
A reaper tired reposes
Among his gathered corn:
So might I, till the morn!

Cold as the cold Decembers,
Past as the days that set,
While only one remembers
And all the rest forget,—
But one remembers yet.

In 1886 came the death of her mother, for
whose eighty-second birthday, four years before,
she wrote the valentine beginning:

My blessed Mother dozing in her chair
On Christmas Day seemed an embodied Love,
A comfortable Love with soft brown hair
Softened and silvered to a tint of dove;

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A better sort of Venus with an air
Angelical from thoughts that dwell above;
A wiser Pallas in whose body fair
Enshrined a blessed soul looks out thereof.¹

Nor is Christina the only witness of her mother's beauty of character. Theodore Watts-Dunton declares:

All that is noblest in Christina's poetry, an ever-present sense of the beauty and power of goodness, must surely have come from the mother, from whom also came that other charm of Christina's to which Gabriel was peculiarly sensitive, her youthfulness of temperament.

Mrs Rossetti seems to have found happiness in selfless devotion to her husband and children. Her daughter Maria Francesca found it in the renunciation of earthly ties. Christina missed both these consolations. She remained in the world, but not of it, a Stranger and Pilgrim. After the death of her mother Christina lived on in the house in Torrington Square, Bloomsbury, which they had occupied since 1876, devoting herself to the care of her invalid aunts Charlotte and Eliza Polidori, one of whom died in 1890 and the other in 1893. When Mackenzie Bell, the writer of Christina Rossetti's biography, entered this house he seemed to feel in its atmosphere "the quietude, the controlled and ordered sadness," he associated with her poetry. Before her aunt died Christina's own health, always precarious, had

¹ "Valentines to my Mother." 1832.

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begun to fail. The closing months of her life were overcast by physical pain and spiritual depression. She died on December 28th, 1894. The scene of her burial, described in Watts-Dunton's sonnets "The Two Christmastides," with the snow-strewn landscape, the wintry gleam of sunshine, the robin trilling its song in the leafless branches, seems almost symbolical of her poetry and life, neither of which is flooded with warmth and colour. It was fitting that Swinburne, who had always been a profound admirer of Christina Rossetti, should write her elegy :

A soul more sweet than the morning of new-born
May

Has passed with the year that has passed from the
world away.

A song more sweet than the morning's first-born
song

Again will hymn not among us a new year's
day.

Not here, not here shall the carol of joy grown
strong

Ring rapture now, and uplift us, a spell-struck
throng,

From dream to vision of life that the soul may see
By death's grace only, if death do its trust no
wrong.

Scarce yet the days and the starry nights are
three

Since here among us a spirit abode as we,

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Girt round with life that is fettered in bonds of
time,
And clasped with darkness about as is earth with
sea.

And now, more high than the vision of souls may
climb,
The soul whose song was as music of stars that
chime,
Clothed round with life as of dawn and the
mounting sun
Sings, and we know not here of the song sublime.

The lines to which William Michael gave the title "Sleeping at Last," apparently written not long before Christina Rossetti died, seem to have been composed in anticipation of her own death. They bear no semblance to Swinburne's rapturous lyric, with its anticipation of the hymns of triumphant souls in heaven. Yet the quieter and more subdued note is in harmony with the spirit of her poetry, which ends, as it had begun, with the expression of a longing for rest:

Sleeping at last, the trouble and tumult over,
Sleeping at last, the struggle and horror past,
Cold and white, out of sight of friend and of lover,
Sleeping at last.

No more a tired heart downcast or overcast,
No more pangs that wring or shifting fears that
hover,
Sleeping at last in a dreamless sleep locked fast.

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Fast asleep. Singing birds in their leafy cover
Cannot wake her, nor shake her the gusty blast
Under the purple thyme and the purple clover
Sleeping at last.

The dominant feeling is the desire for escape from the past and the present, not ecstatic anticipation of the future. It is the poignantly human cry of a soul who felt with St Augustine, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it rest in Thee."

